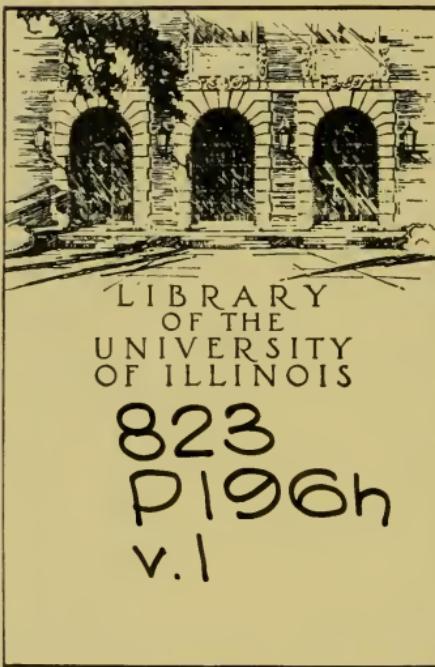


Having
AND
Holding



BY

J.E. PANTON.



Baylor

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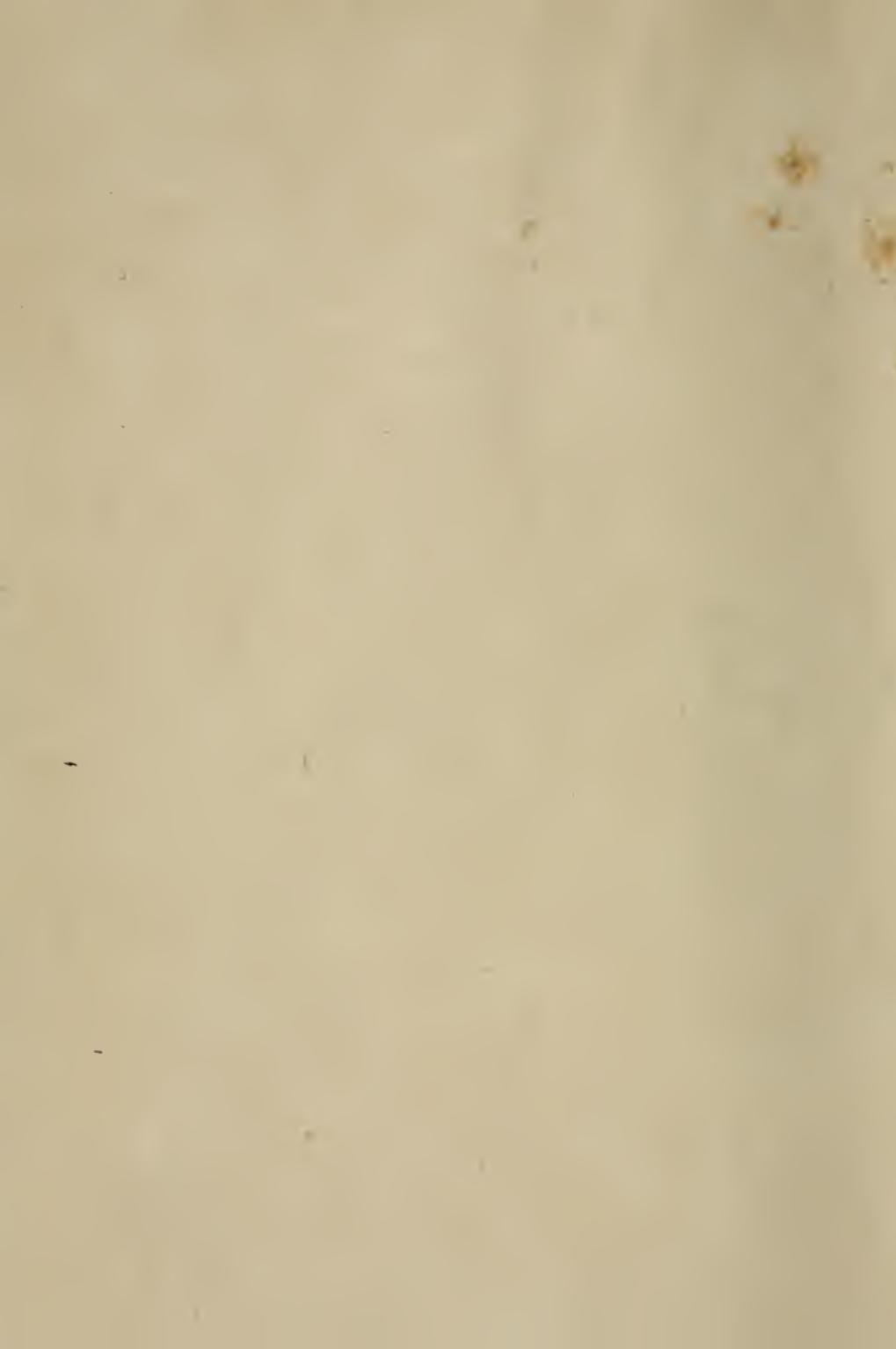
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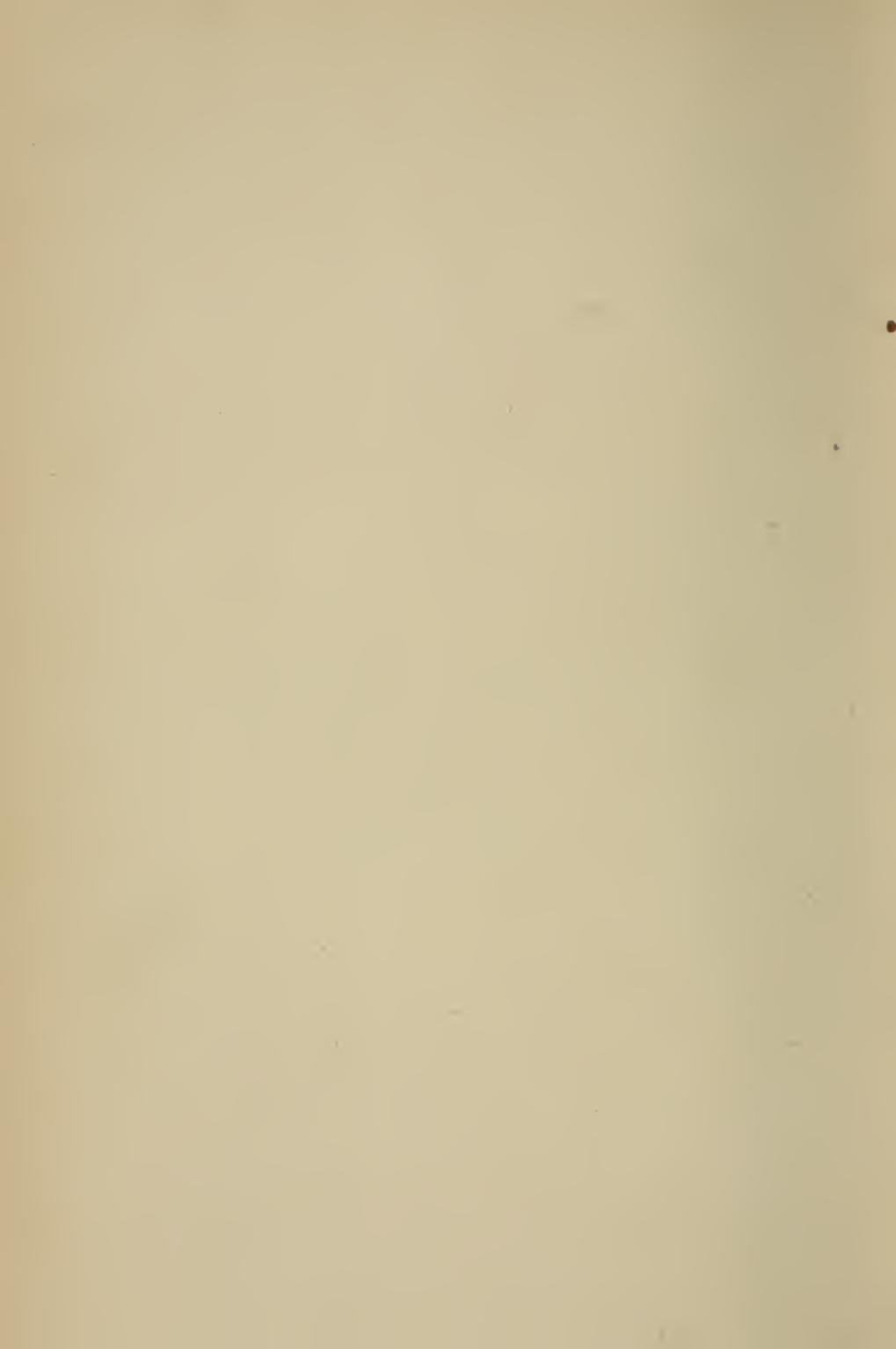
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HAVING AND HOLDING.



HAVING AND HOLDING;

A Story of Country Life.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

J. E. PANTON,

AUTHOR OF

"FROM KITCHEN TO GARRET," "THE CURATE'S WIFE,"
ETC., ETC.

VOLUME I.

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1890.

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TO B. S.,

IN MEMORY OF MANY TRAMPS AMONG
THE FULBROOK HILLS.

CONTENTS.

VOLUME I.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. BEVERCOMBE VICARAGE	9
II. TWO JUNE DAYS	37
III. A SERIOUS TALK	66
IV. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT	99
V. "SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT?"	129
VI. "THE PAST WAS FAIR; THE FUTURE FAIRER STILL"	159
VII. A CALL FROM THE SQUIRE	189
VIII. PINK AND BLUE FEVER	218

HAVING AND HOLDING;

A STORY OF COUNTRY LIFE.

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CHAPTER I.

BEVERCOMBE VICARAGE.

JACINTH MERRIDEW sat in the big bow-window of the Vicarage study, looking the very incarnation of misery.

True, the outlook was not inspiriting, but though the rain was falling in the hopeless manner particularly characteristic of the Southern county in which Bevercombe is situated, and though the view, circumscribed always, was doubly so on this special day, still, wet days in such a room as the Bevercombe study should be bearable, and though tedious, were surely not sufficient to

account for the expression of utter discontent and despair that disfigured Miss Merridew's otherwise pretty face.

"You needn't go unless you like," said Mrs. Merridew, the vicar's wife, who was seated by the fire, that even on the June day on which our story opens, was quite as necessary as in the middle of December. "I cannot understand you, Jacinth, I must confess; most girls would be delighted to have your chances of seeing what our would-be-member is like; and I only wish my conscience were sufficiently elastic to allow of my going too. Come, cheer up, and think what you will wear on the 17th. I never knew the time when the idea of a new gown could not chase the shadows from that brow of yours. What a mercy we have all those patterns! we can really come to some definite conclusion now before Rhody-Jemimy comes for the post-bag." And so saying, she burrowed among the over-flowing

débris of a work-table drawer that stood beside her, and disinterred a quantity of those small snippings of unfashionable materials, sent out by enterprising shop-keepers in the hope of disposing of some of their more *outré* fabrics among those whose distance from town would seem to ensure ignorance on the subject of what is and what is not worn.

“I wish I were Rhody-Jemimy,” said Jacinth, irrelevantly, as she rose languidly from her seat by the window, and, coming forward, took up some of the patterns and turned them over quite as contemptuously as they deserved.

“Sometimes I wish that too,” replied Mrs. Merridew, taking up her work, which she had allowed to fall neglected on the ground; “but I can’t for the life of me see why you should. I can’t give notice to Bob and look out for a new place like our post-girl has done, because even if Bob were out of the

question there are three good reasons still left against my doing so. But you can, Jacinth, and I often and often wonder why you don't."

"Because I've a conscience, I grieve to say," replied her sister-in-law, carelessly ; "and because I remember all you and Bob have given up, and do give up, daily for me. I only wish I had been born without that encumbrance. I am sure I should have been much happier. Why, I can't even lie in bed late, or neglect the village, because, if I do, I don't enjoy myself one bit. My conscience, or whatever you call it, is always prodding at me ; it's prodding me now, Barbara, horribly, and that's why I am so miserable."

"Don't give way to it," answered Mrs. Merridew, laughing at Jacinth's earnestness. "Why should you ? We can only afford one new dress between us for this auspicious occasion, and naturally that dress must be yours. You have no excuse to offer for not

going. I have dozens ; and you know quite well that even if I accepted, and had the garment made to fit me, one of the boys would be sure to crack his head ; or the whole lot would catch cold, or mumps, or something ; and I should have to stay and nurse them, and there would be the dress wasted. I do wish we could wear each other's things ; but as we can't, you must go, and I'll stay at home. It's tempting Providence for any mother of a family to accept an invitation sent out three weeks before the day."

"It is no good writing to Issy, I suppose?" asked Jacinth, tentatively.

"Of course it would be good in one sense," replied Mrs. Merridew, brightly. "It would result in a box of cast-off raiment and a letter as long as a House of Common's petition, and about as useful and entertaining ; but when you remember the last box and the last letter, I wonder you can think of turning Issy and Issy's eloquence on us again."

"It is a curious arrangement of Providence that taste and money so seldom go together," remarked Jacinth, wearily. "How I would enjoy myself, and how all at Bevercombe would enjoy themselves, if I had only half Issy's income; and what sweet frocks you and I should have! Now Issy never buys a single thing that is not hideous to begin with; and somehow or other all the things she sends us have such spots and blemishes on that they are good for nothing. I wonder if she would mind wearing a pinafore. I think I shall suggest it to her, then we might somehow use the dreadful garments she sends us. If they were only clean we might sell them; as it is, they won't even dye decently. Don't you hate and abhor being poor, Barbara? Don't say you don't, for I am sure I shall not believe you if you do."

"Poor is such a relative term," replied Mrs. Merridew, laughing. "I can't even

allow I am poor. You see there's Bob, to say nothing of the children. I do heartily wish you could have as many new frocks as you want, but as long as you are all well and have enough to eat, and Bob's spaniels take prizes, and he is not bored, I really don't feel very poor. Then I am not like you, Jacinth, dear. I have always been used to work, and this sweet village is such a change after Gower Street and then Bob's East-end Curacy, that I never seem able to be thankful enough for all. But," she added, hastily, as she noted a frown on her sister's face, "don't please think, dear, I don't know how bad it all is for you; you were brought up so differently, and expected so much more."

"Barbara, I can never forgive him, never," interrupted Jacinth, rising to her feet and walking rapidly up and down the room. "I know he was my father," she added, as she saw Mrs. Merridew flush and look quickly

at her. “ You can’t say one word to me conscience—my inconvenient conscience—has not already said over and over again ; but I do maintain that parents have a duty to their children, as well as children to their parents, and that he had no more right to disgrace us than we had to disgrace him. Why, I remember his almost cursing poor Bob because he owed £300 at college which he could not pay ; and yet, forsooth, he shot himself and left us nothing but his unpaid gambling debts and the curses of the widows and orphans he had ruined by his reckless speculations. You never heard half ; never knew how Bob was thrust into the Church because there was this living in our family ; how Issy, who had been half engaged to Sir Godfrey Pffenell, married old Sanderson’s money-bags to escape governessing ; and how I, who was going to do great things, had to take anything that offered. It happened to be something I could do, luckily, until the

happy day when this living fell in, and you, dear, sweet you, brought me home here and settled me on you, a costly, lazy incumbrance for life. Now, if I were only earning my bread, I might be able to bear my life, as it is——”

“As it is,” interrupted Mrs. Merridew quietly, drawing Jacinth down by the fire, close to her, “as it is, you are earning your bread, as you call it, over and over again. Half the craving after independence you nineteenth century girls possess, is impatience of control and longing for excitement, and is most unhealthy too. In Bob’s absence, I shall turn preacher and quote Kingsley—‘Do the work that’s nearest, though it is dull at whiles.’ You know the rest.”

“There are no lame dogs to help over stiles here,” said Jacinth, smiling despite herself.

“Here’s a very lame dog,” replied Mrs. Merridew, holding up a small pair of garments

that showed a more intimate acquaintance with jagged tree branches than could be desired by anyone except a tailor. "Now, Jacinth, who but you can patch these in a manner to satisfy the school-room autocrat? What I shall do when Brian goes away from home and requires what he calls real clothes, I don't know. However, 'Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.' Were you not here I must have a governess somehow, or, at least, a regularly good nurse. Now we can manage; and if Bob's dogs and his writing 'turn up trumps'—to quote Bob—we shall soon do well. Of course we are straightened just at present."

"Because Bob and you are too honest to live in luxury as long as papa's wretched creditors are starving," replied Jacinth, bitterly. "And yet we have all the parsons and parsonesses round sneering at us mightily because Bob tries to turn an honest penny out of his knowledge, and sporting tastes,

and because you do not live up to every farthing of your income, and because we save for others. What an untoward world it is, to be sure ! Now if Issy would only do her share ! ”

“ But it wouldn’t be her share ; it would be her husband’s, and we should not like that,” said Mrs. Merridew quietly. “ Mr. Sanderson’s ideas of honour being strictly commercial, are hardly ours, you know. The elastic conscience of a business man sees no necessity for what he terms quixotic humbug. But we need not trouble about that or anything else. All we have to do is to try and do right, and you should be thankful for your conscience, inconvenient as you term it, that allows you to do your duty by us. Even though life may be a little dreary in consequence, it won’t be dreary soon. Impetuous youth will depart, and then you will appreciate the peace and beauty around us like I do. I never should once have

believed I could be happy so far from the British Museum and omnibuses ; but I am indeed, and often and often I say to myself, I never knew what real happiness was until now."

" You have Bob ; though I can't say Bob's presence or absence makes any difference to me," said Jacinth, carelessly. " I can imagine the man who might, although I have never seen him."

" You must go to the Powell's party, and, who knows, you may meet your hero," replied Mrs. Merridew. " The prince must come some day, you know ; that is the fate of every girl as pretty as you are."

" The prince has come already so often that I feel I have had more than my share of royalty already," remarked Jacinth, flippantly. " When I was six I was in love secretly with a soldier who used to walk out with my nurse ; then I admired a keeper, also in secret and also when I was six, at Marklands —dear old Marklands ! I think Jane's

policeman was next, but I am not sure. Anyhow I gradually ascended through a rising scale of German and French masters until I came out at sixteen, and fell a victim to the puny charms of a German princelet, I think, at a Mansion House ball. I have only loved once since, and that hardly counted, as the unfortunate man was already married. Still, I feel no more chances can come in my way, after all I have already experienced and then cast away. Besides, do not I know exactly with whom I shall meet, all they will say, and what they will have on? which brings me back to our starting point, for at least I do not know what I shall wear; and something I must get, if I am to go, for except this gown and the veteran that has seen more Sundays than I care to recollect, I've not one rag to my name, as Rhody-Jemimy says when she wants a new piece of print advanced her out of the Clothing Club."

"And Rhody-Jemimy will be here in half-an-hour, and there's the material to write for," exclaimed Mrs. Merridew, far more energetically than she usually spoke. "Come, Jacinth, what is it to be—stripes or spots, silk or muslin? I hadn't time to look through last week's *Lady's Pictorial*, and I am afraid it has gone back, or we might read up the fashions and——"

"And so become the mock of many," interrupted her sister-in-law, laughing, and bundling all the patterns back into the gaping drawer in the work-table. "Those patterns will come in delightfully for little Betty's patchwork, but they will not do for me. Fashionable poverty is absurd; it can only be decent when it is unobtrusively clad, and that I shall be by purchasing the everlasting black grenadine at Brooks' shop. That will please Brooks; so I shall kill two birds with one stone. I confess I should love not to have to consider these details, and if ever the

prince comes, he must be able to give me all the beautiful dresses I adore, or he need not put in an appearance. Ah! Barbara, I often think the old story of Eve and the apple is a mistake; the devil must have tempted her with other things besides, or else we women could never do the idiotic things we do in order to have lovely clothes and perfect surroundings. The love of beauty we all of us inherit is nothing short of a curse."

"Is there no beauty there to admire?" said Mrs. Merridew, quietly, putting down her work and leading Jacinth to the window. While they had been talking the rain had stopped, the dense gray mantle of cloud had parted as it so often does at evening after a day's downpour, and the whole garden was glittering under a sudden flood of sunset radiance. Mrs. Merridew threw open the window and leaned out; the thrushes and blackbirds were singing away hastily as if to make up for their silence; a cuckoo was

giving vent to its monotonous call in a broken and irregular manner that spoke volumes for the time of year; and a curious mingled odour of damp earth, roses and mignonette began to rise, while tiny miniature showers fell ever and anon from the creepers that covered the house, and that were the refuge of many a nesting bird.

“Well?” asked Mrs. Merridew.

“Oh, yes, it’s beautiful enough,” replied Jacinth, discontentedly seating herself on the window-ledge and watching the gardener, who was coachman, groom and dog-tender on week-days; and clerk and leader of the choir Sundays; and who came out with the sunshine to slay snails, tie up roses, and do the hundred and one little jobs always waiting for him; “but Rogers is more interesting to me than the loveliest landscape, because he is human, and because he can speak. I’d rather walk down Bond Street and glue my nose against the shop-windows

there, knowing I could buy whatever took my fancy, than see the most lovely landscape eyes ever rested on. I am quite aware I am a Goth, but I can't help it, and, as I remarked before, my prince must be able to put the key of my paradise into my hands, or he needn't come wooing to me."

"There's Lord William Petersfield, our would-be member," replied Mrs. Merridew, her busy fingers engaged in knitting, even while she was drinking in the view ; "what have you to say to him? Young, rich, the brother of our own particular duke, clever, likely to be in the Government, unattached, as far as we know ; the very man, surely ; and you are to meet this Phœnix among good matches on the 17th. What can heart of girl desire more? it is a chance in a thousand."

"Rather more than a thousand," replied Jacinth. "I might as well select the man in the moon ; besides, Barbara, brother to a

duke as he is, don't you know the man is a Liberal?"

"That is nothing against *him*," answered Mrs. Merridew. "Of course a Liberal is not nice, and an untitled h-less Liberal like our good friend Reuben Powell is an utter abomination. But a duke's brother takes the disease very lightly, like measles in one's youth, you know, and only has it out of pure cussedness, as Bob would say. Ah!" she added, a smile illuminating her face and causing her to look quite beautiful, as a familiar whistle was heard across the court-yard, "there is Bob ; now we shall hear the news." And then, as Jacinth leaped easily over the low window-sill into the dripping garden, and opened the door that led from the vicarage garden into the flagged space sacred to the dogs, Mrs. Merridew smoothed her hair and straightened her dress, and looked eagerly out for her husband, who, despite the seven years they had been

married, had not yet ceased to be his wife's lover.

"On the road to fortune, dearest!" he shouted as soon as he saw Mrs. Merridew at the window, then carelessly tugging a stray lock of hair that as usual meandered down Jacinth's neck, as if the weariness of life did not allow of her doing her superabundant locks full justice, he added: "Ah! Miss Untidy, you little know what I have here; but wait, Barbara must have first peep;" and putting his arm round his wife's waist, as she stood at the window, quietly smiling and knitting away, he sat down on the window-sill, and with his other hand drew out two or three letters and a telegram, all of which he gave Mrs. Merridew, taking away her work, and, regardless of dropped stitches and general destruction, stuffed it all into the wide, untidy pockets of the rough shooting jacket, that was, perhaps, scarcely clerical attire; yet that could not prevent Robert

Merridew from looking anything save a high-bred, cultured, good, English gentleman. “Three first prizes!” he exclaimed at last, as he watched delightedly his wife’s sparkling face ; “to say nothing of twenty guineas each offered for Rose’s puppies. I knew I was right about the old girl’s points, and I wouldn’t have believed the whole staff of the *Field* had they told me to a man I was wrong ; yet this backs my opinion gallantly. I shan’t have one dog in the kennels once this gets out, and my reputation is made. Five times twenty makes £100, and 100 shillings over—the £100 may go to Ceardew’s orphans, but the shillings Barbara shall have. They’ll almost buy you that brown silk that nearly matches your hair, eh ! Barbara ? Now, if I wasn’t a parson, I’d have champagne for tea to-night ; but as I am, I’ll have an extra pipe in the shop and count up our prospects. Oh ! money, money! the possession of you makes a new man of me ; if

only we were clear of debt and had £1,000 a year, how we would enjoy ourselves to be sure ! Well, who knows ? I was offered a berth on the *Squire* by this afternoon's post ; there's £250 a year ; then the dogs ; but when I remember all I owe, it takes the heart out of a man."

" Rather recollect how much we have paid," said Mrs. Merridew. " Come, Bob, you're tired ; that seven miles drive over the heath in the rain is enough to take your heart out, as you express it, nothing else. Come in, change your things, and call the bairns. Brian is wild to know about the show, and dying to hear how Jock and Jenny went in tandem."

" Oh, those wretched donkeys !" said Bob, bursting into a roar of laughter ; " I never had such fun in all my life, and didn't I wish Jacinth had been there. They went like a couple of Shetland ponies, as straight as a die, until we reached the level crossing

going into Barford. Something put them out there, and from that spot to the market cross their antics were awful ; and to add to my horror, it was market day ; and despite the rain, I met every soul that I didn't want to. You know my character was never very good in Fulbrook, was it ? now I shan't have a shred left, for every parson and parsoness in the district were in Barford, and they all saw me : the boy running in front to keep Jock straight, and I myself, both my hands full of the reins and 'Tickler,' jogging up and down in the cart, the parcels flying, and Jenny's heels, every now and then, on the level of my nose. When we did stop at the Post Office, old Cutler came up, and freezingly asked me if I were an advance guard, belonging to the Circus."

"Old Cutler, indeed!" broke in Jacinth, angrily, " he'd be polite enough if you and Barbara did your shopping in a carriage and pair like he does ; but then we pay

our way, and his sons' bills and his sons' conduct——”

“ Need not be discussed by us,” interrupted Bob, “ poor old chap ! I wouldn't be in his shoes for the whole world ; no one knows how sorry I am for him, and, indeed, for the whole Fulbrook set.”

“ Why ? ” asked his wife gently.

“ Because they won't know us, and we are so very much more amusing than most people, while we own our share of beauty, eh, Jacinth ? and should make a fine show at the County balls, if they were kind to us,” replied Bob, lazily. “ Then, too, you can't look at poor Mr. Cutler, without seeing how worn and tired he is ; his carriage and pair are a desperate struggle to keep himself right in the eyes of the Barford people. Now, we don't struggle, we are frankly what we are, and in consequence we have mighty appetites, good tempers, and excellent nights, and as I said before, quite worth calling upon if they only knew it.”

"But they would have called over and over again," said Mrs. Merridew, "had they not feared to embarrass us, because we could not return their calls as we had no carriage. Mr. Cutler has told me this, and so did Mrs. Edwards; the one spoke for Barford, the other for the whole Fulbrook district, so we mustn't blame them too much."

"Ah! now that reason is done away with," said Bob, once more bursting into one of his hearty laughs; "we, too, have a carriage and pair; you and I and the donkeys will go to-morrow, Bab, to call on the Proters. Mrs. Procter's tongue will act crier; all Fulbrook will hear we can return calls, then we shall see."

"Now let us see tea," said Mrs. Merridew. "Remember, Bob, what you have to do; there's Rogers' son to visit before night; I hope you got his medicine, by the way; all the dogs to call upon, your letters to answer, and last, but not least, Brian and Betty to

interview. Betty has been talking of nothing but the new hat you were to fetch her from Barford."

"I only fetched William's physic and the village parcels," replied her husband ; "those donkeys made everything else quite unsafe. Betty shall choose her own hat. I love to see her prancing about before the glass ; she's the very vainest imp I ever saw, and reminds me painfully of what you were, Jacinth. By the way, I saw Lord William in Barford to-day. I was much amused by the quiet manner he was taking stock of the people ; of course, our man was green with jealousy, and more effusive than ever. I stared when I saw old Powell go up to him and smack him on the back—'ullo 'Erbert,' he said, 'you and Lord William should know each other ; shake 'ands, yer know, and all that sort o' thing,' and then as the rivals followed his advice, and did shake hands, he gave one of his most horrible chuckles and dug

young Talbot in the ribs, until he squirmed again."

"Horrid man!" exclaimed Jacinth; "thank Heaven he is a Liberal!"

"There's one good point in his character," replied Bob, easily, "it's such a temptation for that class of individual to turn Conservative and Churchman when he sets up his carriage. I really honour old Powell more than I can say for the courage with which he has stuck to his colours; and you forget, Jacinth, I too, hold Liberal principles, and would not vote Conservative, even to please you and Bab. I only call Herbert Talbot, our man, because he's sure to get in."

"Yes; thank goodness!" said his sister, flushing.

"No; not thank goodness," remarked Bob, laughing, as he watched her indignant face, "rather thank the snobs of the universe; the folks who sacrifice principle, honesty, unselfishness, everything, in fact, because they

want to keep what they have, regardless of their poorer brethren ; as long as the British snob and the landed gentry exist, county representation is a farce, at least, as far as we Liberals are concerned ; give the labourer a vote, then——”

“ Dear Bob, I can’t have you going off on one of your pet hobbies, and riding rough-shod over Jacinth and me,” said Mrs. Merridew, smiling at his earnestness ; “we all know every one of your arguments, don’t we, Jacinth ? and you know ours. Your principles don’t allow you to vote, I am glad to say, so you are not dangerous, or we might try to convert you to our way of thinking ; women, you know, are great powers in that line—they can talk.”

“ Oh ! heavens ! they can,” remarked Bob, gathering up his belongings, and preparing to make ready for his nightly visit to the bairns’ nursery ; where romps that almost shook the house down were the order of the

day whenever he entered it. "And that's poor old Powell's danger. His females, to the baby, are all at him, to turn his coat; because they want to get in with the Talbots and all the Fulbrook set; and I question if he'll hold out when he finds his 'girls' shut out from the magic circle. They are pretty girls too, and so lady-like I feel quite sorry for them. That poor gentle mother of theirs seems too weak to stick to her husband too, and I know she has remarked she wished pa would go to church instead of chapel, 'which is the thin end of the wedge,' as pa would say." Then, as small voices were heard shouting impatiently overhead, Mr. Merridew ran upstairs to the children, while his wife and sister made the study tidy for his occupation after tea, and then went into the dining-room, where that cheap, orthodox, and depressing meal was ready and waiting for them.

CHAPTER II.

TWO JUNE DAYS.

BEVERCOMBE Vicarage was, take it all the way round, a very dreary spot in which to pass one's days, when only twenty-two years of life had been tried, and the passionate desire for "something to happen," that is as a consuming fire in early youth, has not burned itself out, or been quenched in those bitter tears, the shedding of which teaches us all, as time goes on, that those folk are happiest to whom the least happens, and that no adventures are as delightful as that slow, sweet procession of calm days, the Indian summer-time of existence, that at twenty-two is as the veriest stagnation, the

most terrible of futures to regard ; but that is really happiness to those who know how to appreciate it fully.

To Jacinth Merridew, the seven miles that lay between her and what she was pleased to call civilisation, were as very prison bars, keeping her in and obliging her to centre all her energies on her immediate surroundings. Fourteen miles were too many for her to undertake often, and in consequence, she would often content herself with walking only to the "World's End," in the hopes of meeting the postman, who might have letters that otherwise would not reach her until Rhoda-Jemimy—whose double-barreled name seemed to have weighed her down from earliest infancy and made her the stunted thing she was—brought the post-bag and discovered the emptiness that never ceased to disappoint her ; although by this time she should have been well used to it.

As Jacinth looked out of her window, the

morning after this story opens, her face wore even a deeper look of dejection than it had done the day before ; although her eyes had opened on as sweet a June morning as one might wish to see, and although there was apparently no reason why she should not be the happiest of girls. But some casual look at the Almanack had reminded her that this third of June was an anniversary, and her thoughts had travelled back swiftly, if unwillingly, to those days, so long ago now, when life looked fair indeed, and she was seventeen, and all her days seemed opening out before her, like some gay procession, the *finis* of which should be hidden in a bridal veil.

Could it be only five years since that awful, awful day, when Mr. Merridew's suicide had, as one of the daily papers expressed it, shaken the whole world of commerce to its foundations ? Five years only since they had discovered that their father was not the

prosperous *dilettante* they had imagined him—the kindly patron of young artists, authors, and singers—but the thief, forger, and long-headed, unscrupulous banker, of whose business, and of whose real career outside their own front door, they had been as ignorant as were the people who trusted him ; and who never somehow connected Vivian Merridew with the great house of Merridew, Baster and Badger, whose brilliant coups and financial successes, built on the necessities and sufferings caused by sharp dealings during a great war, had been the wonder of the world—that same world whose verdict was unanimous when the fall came, and who shrieked, “I told you so!” “and serve you right!” with the mouth that had eaten the firm’s state banquets gallantly ; the while there was not a finger that did not point scorn, not a voice that did not cry shame on his innocent children, who were as ignorant of what their father really was as

were the chairs on which he sat, the bed on which he slept.

The story of the dual life lived by some men has yet to be written ; the history of the sweet-tempered, affectionate husband and father, who is perfection in his domestic relations, who loves pictures, and beauty in all shapes and forms, and who is passionately attached to all his home-surroundings, has never been contrasted fully with this same man who changes his personality as surely as he puts on a different coat in his office ; and who, the moment he leaves the society of those for whom presumably he would gladly die, becomes someone else, whose every action imperils his family's fair fame, and whose second life is a flat contradiction of the one known to those who are facetiously called his nearest and dearest.

The wretched clerk, who becomes thief perhaps to buy luxuries for a failing, sickly wife, or a foolish ambitious one, is to be pitied

profoundly ; he sins because of his love. But the man who, out of mere wantonness, of mere lack of self-control, imperils the whole of his household, should have no pity given him ; for while he causes people to wonder if two souls can at the same time possess one body, and if two individuals can possibly simultaneously inhabit the skin of one man, he surely but certainly sows in the souls of his children bitter hatred, that brings forth a desperate crop of evil things that all too often chokes all those finer feelings, and slays that intense faith in the capabilities for goodness in the human race, which is, after all, the salvation of so many of us, and is the cause of all the good actions that are done in the world.

On this side of the picture Robert Merridew had steadfastly refused to look ; but it was on this side alone that Jacinth gazed whenever she turned over the pages of the past, and dwelt on the records of the days that were no more.

And yet Robert had never had the cause to care half as much for his father as had Jacinth ; for except for his intense love for the country and country sports, and his successes at college, Robert had always been a disappointment to Mr. Merridew, who added to a man's not infrequent slight jealousy of his eldest son, an intense contempt for a lad who never told a lie, who called dissimulation and small recognised society shams by plain old-fashioned names, and who had married his cousin's governess because he loved her, and refused the lady of title provided for him, notwithstanding threats of disinheritance, and all sorts of pains and penalties, which he was to incur if he married the girl he adored, in preference to the one who would have shed lustre on his already very prominent name.

Jacinth, on the contrary, had been her father's ewe-lamb ; her rapidly-increasing beauty, her cleverness, her love of reading, of

society, and of luxurious and exquisitedomestic surroundings, seemed himself over again.

His little schemes for aggrandisement were echoed, and then elaborated by her, in every way ; and he had but to turn to her to receive the eager sympathy, the entire *rapprochement*, that had never been his, even from his wife ; who, luckily for herself, poor creature, died three years before her husband's failure, and so escaped the worst blow of all. There were some ; Robert Merridew among them, perhaps, although such a hint had never passed his lips, even to Barbara herself ; who thought they knew that Lady Caroline Merridew had guessed something of what the world persists in calling, in all such cases, a man's real self ; regardless of the fact that a man's good side is surely as true as any evil he may have in him ; and that the saint does not cease to be a saint, because the sinner occasionally comes forth, and is stronger for the nonce of the two.

At all events, whether Lady Caroline had or had not discovered the clay feet of her idol, she had seemed so content to die, had spoken such imploring words to Robert to look after his father in the brief delirium, that mercifully softened the parting between mother and son, as far at least as she was concerned, that there was certainly some ground for the talk that became loud indeed after the banker's suicide, and was echoed triumphantly by all their titled relations, who quoted Mr. Merridew's "outrageous cruelty to poor Caroline" to all those who feebly wondered at the way poor Caroline's children were forgotten and avoided ; now they might presumably be expected to require the help that had always been forthcoming whenever any of "poor Caroline's" impecunious relations required setting on those feeble legs, exclusively the property of a good many of the younger branches of the aristocracy ; who, while they neither toil nor spin themselves,

look to those who do these degrading things to maintain them in the position to which, great Heavens ! they believed themselves called.

Not one word, not one single detail of the story of the past, had Jacinth forgotten.

Did she not recollect the dawn of just such another June day, when she had drawn back the delicate lace curtains that shrouded the windows of her pink and white bedroom in Park Lane, eager to see if last night's promise were fulfilled, and if the day were as sweet as it had bidden fair to be ?

Did she not remember the very pink and white flowers in her window-boxes, the dew and heavy mist lying among the beautiful green trees in the Park, the tones of the gardeners' voices as they took advantage of the cool delicious dawn to put out the bedding plants, and finally the gentle drifting away of the tremulous gray veil, and the gradual birth of such sunlight as seemed the very

embodiment of her dream of triumph and success?

Issy, newly engaged to Sir Godfrey Pffenell as she was, slept profoundly, not caring whether the day were fine or not, as on no mere chance of weather, no mere casual meeting, hung her future, her portion of this world's happiness ; but Jacinth knew that if the water-party at Maidenhead did not come off, Francis Seymour and she might not meet for at least another week, and the desolation of such a thought as that could only be appreciated by the mind of seventeen ; to whom a week is as an æon—a period of seven days, unblessed by a sight of what old nurse persisted in calling “the objeck,” nothing short of a century.

Then came the certainty of such weather as, gird at it how we may for its uncertainty, its brevity, is surely never met with, save during an English June.

Every bird is vocal, every flower just

bursting into bloom ; the lilacs, laburnums, guelder roses and flowering shrubs are at their very best ; the foliage of the trees has not lost its first emerald green, or those delicate gradations of colour by which an experienced eye can tell from a distance the yellower oak from the darker chestnut, the vivid green beech from the more shaded elm, and which merge in July into an unusual dark hue, that while suggesting "cool depths of forest green," undoubtedly is yet a little funereal, a little monotonous ; and London, bright, happy, delightful, many-sided London, is at her best, and in gay summer raiment, shows none of the scars of poverty, meanness, and wickedness, that in winter and autumn are all too apparent to the most careless eye, the most casual observer.

Could it be the same girl, Jacinth wondered sadly, who looked out so happily then, and who now regarded just such another morning

from the vicarage window with so much weariness and hopelessness?

Then, the years allotted to man did not seem long enough for all she was to do, all she meant to enjoy ; now, each day was a year, each year something terrible to contemplate, leading as they did to grey, weary age, ending ultimately in a narrow grave in Bob's untidy, over-crowded churchyard. And as Jacinth thought of this with a shudder, she almost was forced to believe that she and that hopeful child of five years back were not the same ; and that while her present personality was too unpleasant not to be a fact, that other one belonged most surely to some happy creature, whose pleasant years and delightful adventures she had become acquainted with, in the pages of some almost forgotten novel.

How easy it was to turn again those pages, and remember ! Even the agony when the hansom cab horse fell on her way with the

maid, to join her chaperon at Paddington ; and she dreaded to look at her watch lest she should confirm her fear that the train was gone and she was left behind, was reproduced ; the flutter of colour and brightness on the platform, that told its own story of the special train and the big party, was seen once more ; and then came the consciousness of his presence in a boating suit, in which her soul told her he looked like a young Greek god ; albeit common sense would have suggested flannel trousers and striped jackets had not much in common with those heroes of antiquity ; the words she meant to say, and could not get out because she was too shy to speak ; the idiotic games they played in the summer-house at Cliveden, where they had landed because a sudden thunder-storm had come up, were all hers again ; and Jacinth laughed a little even now to herself, as she recollected the face of the gardener, as he came suddenly on a group of

presumably sane people, who were seated solemnly round the shelter, repeating a long string of insane words, beginning with "pink monkeys, blue devils," and going on and on, until the game ended in someone utterly breaking down, under the strain of recollecting a string of words that was utterly unconnected, and that no one save a phonograph could be expected to repeat.

Then came the all too short journey back to town, in the delicious gloom of a badly-lighted railway carriage ; when Mr. Seymour did all the talking, and Jacinth was bathed in blushes as she listened ; while her little hand rested snugly in his, under a wrap that her father, always thoughtful of his darling, had insisted on her taking with her, because of the river damp ; and then came Paddington and the watchful maid, who consented to a four-wheeler instead of a hansom ; and risked her dignity on the box-seat with the driver, conscious that a couple of Francis Seymour's

hardly earned sovereigns would act as an excellent plaster to any wound her vanity might receive ; and bargaining that the cab should stop ten minutes' walk from home, lest the under-servants should see her, or lest the maid next door, whose people only drove a one-horse brougham, and in consequence of that was duly conscious of her immeasurable inferiority to Towser, should spy her out and have her revenge at the earliest opportunity.

On that drive in the jolting cab, transferred for the nonce into Cupid's car, yet heavy with a smell of general fustiness and dampness that was never equalled, Jacinth would not dwell, even in fancy. She could not bear it ; she would only think of the open front door, the gush of heated air that seemed to engulf her ; the faint smell of the dying roses at her throat ; and Francis Seymour's whispered Good-bye. Yet the words " To-morrow, dearest," were scarcely off his lips, when old Nurse's face

became visible, from a back-ground of startled countenances, which Jacinth had been too blinded by her own intense, if foolish, happiness to perceive before ; and that in one moment seemed an impassable barrier between her and the perfect joy that was her assured possession only a second or two previously.

It did not need old Nurse's whispered words, "God bless my lamb and help her to bear it !" to let her know that in the meagre phrase that sounds so small, and that has broken many a heart, "something had happened," yet not for days and days did she know all that something really meant. The utter poverty, the cruel loss of an adored father, could have been borne after a time ; when the bitter sense of his absence would have gently resolved itself into a gracious, a perfect memory of a perfect loving parent ; and with Francis to love and Francis' love to make life one long holiday for her, the divine love of

parent and child would have been forgotten or put to sleep ; until those days, when a remembrance of all he had been to her, would rise once more and be, as it were, born again, in the relations between her and her children, whose play-time of life should be all the sweeter and better, because of the sweetness and goodness that had been hers as a child, from his hands.

But Jacinth could not, could not forget the disgrace that made her a Pariah in her own eyes, and in the eyes, alas ! of a good many worthy folk, who never seem so virtuous or so happy as when they are carrying out what they consider a divine command, and are visiting the sins of the fathers heavily on their children.

When she first realized all Mr. Merridew had done, she thought she should go raving mad ; the portrait on her mantel-piece, wreathed in flowers as it was, was broken to a thousand atoms on her tiled hearth ; and if

she could, she would have changed her very name and nation, in her feverish anxiety to be someone, go somewhere, where the swindler's name had been never heard—the swindler's presence never left its hated, desolating mark behind.

Issy and Robert had added to her woes intensely by the manner in which they had taken the blow, and borne the overwhelming horror of the stunning tragedy, that made their name a bye-word in the length and breadth of the land ; for though, at first, both had suffered in their way quite as acutely as had Jacinth, it was not Jacinth's way, and this seemed to make their conduct unbearable, indeed, in her eyes.

Issy had borne her Baronet's desertion stoically ; she could not blame him, she remarked, placidly. Had she been in his place she should have behaved precisely as he had done. How could he keep up Pffenell Court, and dower any of the future Miss Pffenells,

unless his wife brought him money? And though they had, after their lights, been quite fond of each other, she really could see no reason to abuse a man for not marrying a penniless girl, who would only be another encumbrance, or an encumbered estate, and who could do as much better for herself now, in her altered position, as she hoped Sir Godfrey would, once the season came again, bringing with it its usual crop of heiresses.

And Issy proved her word by giving her hand, swiftly and willingly, to old Mr. Alexander Sanderson, who had been all his life sheep farming in the Colonies, and fell a ready victim to Issy's smiles, tears, deep mourning, Christian resignation, and the thousand and one wiles she practised to catch the vain, Calvanistic old Scotchman; who had not met a pretty English girl for forty years, and saw in her a fancied resemblance to his Agnes; who had waited for him twenty years in her father's Scotch manse, and died the week

before the letter came bringing her passage money, and a lover-like order to come out at once, for times were mending, and her Aleck bid fair to be a rich man.

Well, the letter was buried with her, and Aleck merged into Alexander, and came home twenty years afterwards, just in the nick of time, and married Issy ; and became the slave Agnes would have been had she not had the happier fate of death, and a calm grave in one of the loveliest parts of Scotland.

But Jacinth thought she could have borne Issy's conduct, who had been sense itself from the schoolroom, where she had begged for extra lessons, and insisted on learning thorough bass and German ; when Jacinth had yearned for sticky sweets, holidays, rubbishy books, and the thousand and one delights of ordinary healthy girlhood ; because learning was always of use, and sweets were apt to spoil the complexion. But Bob was different ; Bob at least would take her side of the question,

and join with her in solemnly abjuring her father's name and in leaving England.

But Bob and Barbara with him would have none of it ! and Bob setting to work to read for orders—an easy task by reason of his position in bye-gone days at college—determined to take his one chance of a living, and to save from the proceeds the £15,000 that remained to be paid, once all his father's property and his own were sold ; and while he consented to Jacinth's procuring an occupation, insisted on her keeping her own name, and taking the secretaryship offered her by a large firm of decorators and art furnishers as Miss Merridew, declaring that there was no earthly reason why she should not keep it.

“ I can't think why you are so hard on the poor old boy,” he had said, more than once. “ You ought to sympathise with a coward, and that was his worst fault. He could not face the muddle his affairs had got into ; and then he couldn't face us and having to dock

you of your little comforts ; and he couldn't bear to let us see he was not quite immaculate. If he had only had courage we should have pulled through in time ; now all we have to do is to work hard and live hard, and clear the name of Merridew once more. I'll never abuse him. I know that, and you should remember it's only ill birds that foul their own nests. One great secret of success is for families to pull together, Jacinth ; that's why the Jews get on wherever they are. You'd have got on much better yourself if you'd make the best of Issy ; but as you won't you won't. You'll have to make the best of me, because I am your guardian, and the strong arm of the law is on my side." And then Bob would kiss her gently, and pass her over to Barbara, whose gentle sweetness and calm goodness soothed the girl. But not even to Barbara was the name of Francis Seymour ever mentioned.

In the first heat of her passion, and in the

first acuteness of her wound, Jacinth had sat down and scribbled a sad, foolish, wicked, tear-stained letter to her young lover. In the pain she was enduring she had no sense that others could be suffering too ; and she forbade him to write to or see her, and ordered him to forget at once that such a miserable wretch as herself existed ; and Francis read her letter with many an astonished whistle.

He was not sorry the break had come from her, for above all love Francis set before him a high altitude, that could only be reached by systematic pushing, and by a certain ability to make himself useful, and to disregard snubs, that would have been heroic had not his aim simply been the somewhat servile one of personal aggrandisement.

And he had seen a short cut to success in a marriage with the rich, clever daughter of a man whose name was a power in every one of those circles that, while each is

separate and distinct, go as a whole to make up society. In the circle of letters Mr. Merridew's smiles had already given him just the footing that he had lacked, and that he had been at first unable to obtain by merit alone ; in the parliamentary circles he had been admitted, too, by the same magician, and had picked up odd atoms of real news, invaluable to his own particular journal ; and Francis knew that a man who lent money to princes and conveniently forgot when interest was due, was not unlikely to put other better things still in the way of a man to whom he was curiously and personally attached, and with whom his youngest pet daughter was ardently in love, with all the strength of a first and very early attachment.

Not that even for all this would Mr. Seymour have spoken of love to Jacinth, had she been plain, stupid, dull, or only half-educated.

He knew well enough how much a

public man's popularity depends on his wife's capabilities, to make such a false step as that ; and he was looking forward to the realization of his fondest dreams when the blow fell, the whole fabric was shattered, and he found himself, as he feared, hampered with a wife whose antecedents would be fatal to at least one-half of his schemes ; the while he could not avoid knowing that Mr. Merridew's help had already placed him where he had now nothing to do but climb ; and that therefore, he was bound in honour, in gratitude, in a thousand different ways, to the pretty sweet-faced child he could not help caring for, despite the worldly armour with which he had defended and doubly defended his heart.

Yet when he read her letter, and recognized the depth of strong passion it revealed, the latent talent, the tempestuous disregard of all conventionality, all restraint, he was half disposed to throw prudence to the winds, and demand the girl who loved him, despite

herself and her own commands; but something intervened at that moment, a sudden call from his journal for special work that took him for awhile from London; and he put aside the letter, to be answered when he had more time, when Jacinth's first sorrowing would be over, and when he would be able to discover if old Merridew's suicide would make any real difference in the estimate in which his children were held. He had the letter, if anyone reproached him with deserting Jacinth; now there was work to be done, his married life was in the future—Jacinth would keep!

Ah! how the days went by no one save Jacinth would ever know; she seemed deserted by the whole world; she appeared to herself a mere bundle of quivering nerves, an incarnation of misery.

Then came release and Bevercombe—a hundred and twenty miles from any chance of seeing Mr. Seymour or hearing his name—a

hundred and twenty miles from all she loved, and from the dear familiar streets, and the old sounds and the old faces. Was it possible to bear it? Was it possible to go on making indifferently fitting frocks for Betty and curious, long-legged, wide-seated knickerbockers for Brian, that resembled grotesquely the garments Issy and she used to notice and laugh at on the children of the coachman in the mews, when, guided by conscience, they paid a duty visit to Mrs. Bond, and heard all the news of the court? It was intolerable to think of her nephew and niece in such clothing, but Barbara only smiled, and said she was thankful they had such good material; while Bob, as usual, laughed, and suggested using up the defunct dogs' skins, in his usual aggravating way.

As if in answer to the thought Jacinth had just reached, as she came to the end of her long, dismal, retrospective glance at the days

that are no more, she heard Bob's clear, beautiful, tenor voice—

“What so rare as a day in June?”

he was warbling, when, coming round the corner, he saw his sister's woe-begone countenance.

“Hulloh, Jay!” he exclaimed, throwing her up a fragrant, pale bud from his new rose by the study window, “look at that and smile again; how can you be so wretched? do not you know it's June, not November, hey, Miss Dismal?”

“It's just because it is June that I am dismal, Bob,” replied his sister, fastening the bud into her dress; “have you forgotten what day it is, of all days in the year?”

CHAPTER III.

A SERIOUS TALK.

FOR a moment Mr. Merridew stopped short, then he said, "No, dear, of course I have not forgotten, but anniversaries are not for the living. What is the good of embittering our lives by dwelling on the past, when the past was dreary and dark? It's not sensible, old girl; come down and talk it out with me. I've got a summons to old Crumpler, at the keeper's cottage; it's just the day for Bevercombe Park, and there's nothing like a walk to get rid of such an attack as yours. Come, hurry! I'll go and let Rose loose; she's the only one I can trust in the park, you know," and burying his hands in his pockets, Mr. Merridew

walked off whistling into the court-yard; while Jacinth, catching up a much-battered old straw hat, the shabbiness of which seemed to her strangely appropriate to her present state of mind, ran downstairs and joined her brother, who was busily engaged in pulling stray straws out of the red setter's long coat, and smoothing her sleek head, while he assured her she was as good as a gold mine to him, and that her children and herself would make his fortune before he died.

The back-yard of the vicarage was quite as unclerical in its appearance as was the master himself.

The yard had been extended into a field at the side, which had been paved to correspond, and this enclosure was now filled by kennels and runs for the dogs, while a big barn had been divided into a stable for Jock and Jinny, a coach-house for the curious lightwood "trap"—it could be called by no other name—sacred to their use, and finally into what Robert Merridew called his shop,

where a lathe, a carpenter's bench, and last, but not least, an enormous desk made by himself, spoke loudly of the owner's numerous occupations ; which were supplemented by sundry medical books, and a stout, well-furnished medicine chest, which had saved many an hour's suffering, and not unseldom many a life in the village, that was seven miles from a doctor, who was at all times none too ready to come across the heath to the assistance of those who were most of them on "the union," and often enough sent for him, simply, as he declared, to see a strange face, and hear what was going on in the neighbouring little town of Barford, where he was harder worked and worse paid than anyone would believe who knows nothing of the life of unpaid toil lived by a country doctor.

The air blowing softly over the wonderful fields of gorse, or "fuzz," as it is called locally, and that is as aromatic as an Eastern perfume, seemed to make Jacinth realize that after all

the world was a very lovely spot, and that there might be worse places than Bevercombe. At all events her surroundings were beautiful enough, and she could not help giving a sigh of enjoyment as they paused in their walk to the wood, and for one moment looked at the scene before them ; while Rose, keeping well to heel, quivered and shook with anguish and longing, yearning for the first of September to come, when, on such a morning as this, Bob's gun would have been under his arm, and they would have been knee-deep in the turnips, or walking the stubble in yonder field, beyond the one already laid up for hay, where the grass is growing high and waving in the gentle breeze ; and where Rose knows, as well as Mr. Merridew does, that a brace of partridges are crouching, having already begun to make a homestead, where they will be discovered with their hatched-out brood, when the mowers come with their scythes (for it was glebe land, and Mr. Merridew scorned the “reaper”), and cut down the

shelter that now seems daily more secure, daily more suitable for a retreat, where a small, brown mother can make her nursery with the greatest content.

But at the gate into the Park more could be seen than this : here four roads meet, one of which led back to the village, one of the others straight on to Barford ; while east and west two others ran, leading one to a wood, famous in early spring for daffodils and white violets and anemones, while the other ran on and on in a straight line to a fashionable watering place, towards which Jacinth often cast longing eyes ; but that had no rail from Barford as yet, and was therefore as far off as London itself, for it was a good twenty-five miles, and Jock and Jinny were hardly capable of that, even had Jacinth's pride allowed her to sit behind those plebian animals.

Standing at the cross-roads, the prettiest view, perhaps, was straight away to Barford. From here, the low, long range of the

Fulbrook hill district was visible, with its purple lights and shades, its surprising hollows, its long, lovely lines, its misty cap of cloud lying on it when the weather was "all for het," or its dense, gray mass of clouds, creeping angrily along it, when the weather meant mischief, and the gulls came shrieking inland ; and from here the eye could travel from barrow to barrow, now covered with glittering, golden gorse, but that told their own stories to those who could understand them, of days of long fights on the heathland, when the Romans conquered Britain, and when the Danes sailed up to Barford, and fought Alfred the Great on his own land, being finally destroyed to a ship, in one of the Fulbrook bays, an event appropriately commemorated by a column surmounted by cannon balls, popularly supposed by the natives to be relics of a fight, which, so far as they know, took place just before their fathers were born.

But if we were to trace all the interest that

makes Bevercombe heathland a very store-house of knowledge for those who are enthusiastic about the "Good old times," we should never open the white gate into the Park, nor pass down the pine-tree shaded moss-path that leads to the keeper's cottage : for it would take a volume to tell of all that may be seen on that apparently barren moorland ; as big a volume as it would require in which to write of the Park itself, its beautiful dark trees, its waving, marvellous under-growth of bracken, its pool, then one mass of yellow water lilies, with white ones in a more secret place never told of, lest the village boys should steal them, undaunted by the keeper ; and finally the cottage itself, where Crumplers had lived for generations as keepers, until the Park was as impossible without a Crumpler, as the reigning Crumpler felt the Park would be without him ; for no one else knew bird, or beast, or fish, or flower as the Crumplers did, who held the secrets of the place like some precious family

treasure that could never be given up to anyone else.

They were a sturdy, independent race, those Crumplers; aristocrats to the backbone, loving the land better than their lives, and believing in the "family" as most people believe in God, with small opinion of women-folk (save and excepting those females belonging to the big house, who might be expected to marry men who could appreciate Bevercombe partridges and pheasants, and would thus bring more worshippers to the shrine of "the coverts"); and with less opinion of "doctors' stuff" and "parson's twaddle"; they lived their own lives manfully, absorbed in the tending and rearing of the game, and rarely troubling themselves about the outside world.

True, they read their weekly paper diligently, and had very strong ideas about the tyranny of the School Board, which taught all sorts of "fullishness," and insisted on

giving learning to those who would have been far better employed searching for eggs in the hedge-bottoms, or in digging up the yellow ants-eggs for the young pheasants ; but beyond this, nothing interested them save the animal world by which they were surrounded, and the sparse talk of the village ; which being all about the "family" and the "parson," was apt to pall after a time.

As Jacinth and her brother finally tore themselves away from the view towards Barford, which even Jacinth could not help enjoying against her will, Mr. Merridew at last broke the silence.

" Barbara and I had a long talk about you, Jacinth, last night," he said, " and we came to the conclusion this life here won't do for you much longer. I can't help feeling awfully sorry for you, dear, but we are going to give you a chance of seeing more of the world. I don't see why you should not follow Carter's eldest daughter's example.

She has gone to Germany to a school there for a bit. She'll teach, you know, as a set-off for her board. Now that isn't a very lively prospect, you'll say, but still it's change, and change is everything, when one is as young as you are."

"Twenty-two is not extremely juvenile," replied Jacinth, bitterly. "No, Bob, good as you and Barbara are, I don't mean to desert Bevercombe ; that's to say," she added, looking at him askance, "unless you want to get rid of me ; you've only to say the word then, and I'm off. Germany, Timbuctoo, anywhere you like, it's all one ; but as long as I can be of service to you, here I am, and here I shall remain. After all, what should I see in Germany I have not seen before ? "

"A change of scene always means new ideas," replied Bob, his countenance plainly betokening his relief that Jacinth had not at once taken him at his word, the while he felt

it his duty to urge her to do so. "The mere rush through London, the sea voyage, the chance meeting with people, would act like a stimulant to you, and in six months you'd come back to us a new creature; I think you'd better take us at our word. How do you know I shall not be thankful to get rid of you, and have the house and Barbara to myself?"

"Because your face belies your words," said Jacinth. "I can see you don't want me to go. I would in one moment," she added, "if I could go properly, and return to you, as you say, with new ideas; but if life in Bevercombe is rather like life in a sack with one's head covered over, life in Germany would mean nothing but a change of sack, for all I should see outside the school-room door; and as to the rush through London and the voyage, third class passengers, such as I should be, have nothing pleasant to look at even there, and I should only curse my

impecuniosity a thousand times more than ever, because I should not have the clothes, the comforts, the attention that are all that make life endurable to me ; here, if one is covered, it's all we require for decency's sake, and no one knows the difference ; there, every well-dressed woman, every shop window, would raise a separate evil spirit in me, and I should only remember the days that are no more, a thousand times more vividly than I do now."

"I wish I could talk to you as I should like to," said Bob sadly ; "but somehow I can't hit upon the right thing to say. Couldn't you get some definite work, some recognised occupation ? You can't think how much happier I have been since I took up the dogs and my scribbling ; every day gives me fresh interests in my surroundings, which I never fully appreciated, until I saw money was to be made out of them ; why ! even this walk will fetch a couple of guineas. I never

knew before how lovely Bevercombe Park could be in early morning in June, and there are plenty of people who will like to hear about it."

Jacinth burst into a fit of laughter. " You have forgotten my peculiar spelling and my erratic notions of grammar and composition," she said lightly. " My dear Bob, a yellow primrose is a yellow primrose indeed to me, and can never be anything more ; now you see a great deal in it, and, what's better still, can make other people see it too. Were I to attempt to do so I should fail quite as ignominiously as I deserve to. Then you must remember I do not want to write. I can't sing or play decently, and I fear I couldn't even act, and I'm not beautiful enough to try it on with the smallest chance of success. Don't forget we rehearsed all this when the smash came ; and that then we arrived at the conclusion that all I was fit for was that stool in the office at Smith and Sons,

and I should have been sent away from there for incompetence, had not your living fallen in and enabled me to retire gracefully, instead of being ignominiously despatched by my master."

"I can't think how it is you cannot really do some one thing," said Bob, meditatively. "You're clever enough and know heaps more than most girls do."

"There you're entirely mistaken," interrupted Jacinth, quietly. "I don't know really anything. I am very receptive, and pick up knowledge when it's lying about like a chicken picks up crumbs that are thrown out to it ; but I have neither energy nor desire to 'get learning' for learning's sake, like Issy can ; or like Barbara does, because some day she'll have to teach Betty as well as Brian. Now, if I were in really good society, I should do the picking up gallantly ; as it is, I can only remember how I shirked my lessons, and how foolishly papa indulged me and

encouraged me to neglect my work. And yet he knew that my very bread might depend on all this."

"He never thought," said Bob, gently. "Oh, let him rest in his grave, Jacinth. I wish you could forget as readily as I have done; you'd soon forgive him then."

"He has not spoiled your life as he did mine," said Jacinth. "I can neither forget or forgive, Bob."

"Do you suppose I wanted to come down here and turn parson?" asked Bob, easily. "You can forget some things, why not the rest?"

"Oh! you are a man, and a man can do as he likes," replied Jacinth, easily; "but we are only going over the old ground, and shall do no good. There's one blessing, an election will make Barford lively, and some of the liveliness may even reach us, who knows? Anyhow, both Mr. Talbot and Lord William will have to call, and

that's something. Heavens!" she added, in a sudden access of bitterness, "to think that I, Jacinth Merridew, should have fallen so low as to contemplate with pleasure the possible visits of two men who wouldn't come near us if they didn't want your support, who'll possibly consider us awful bores, and forget our identity the moment they have ticked our names off their lists; for they'll mark your vote off as hopeless, and so do away with the necessity of another call at once. Couldn't you pretend to be doubtful this time only, Bob? it might induce them to come over more, perhaps, and that's something;" and again she laughed in the same scornful way as before.

"It's my opinion you want Barbara and the medicine chest," said Bob, easily; "your sentiments are most unhealthy. Take my advice, Jacinth, put yourself in Bab's hands; you will soon take a livelier view of matters. You and Betty must compare sensations;

your conduct is very like her's when there's been a school-feast. However, here we are at Crumpler's ; you sit on the gate and meditate, while I go in and see what's the matter ;" and pushing open the wicket, Mr. Merridew went down the flagged path, between the rows of mary-lilies and rose-trees, that were now at their best ; leaving Jacinth to sit on the mossy bank, and contemplate the ghastly relics of bye-gone robbers, duly nailed to the "keepers's tree," to serve as warning to any other egg, or bird-stealer, that might wander that way in search of food, and would be at once deterred from their would-be depredations by seeing dreadful remains of possible acquaintances impaled before their very eyes.

Except for the keeper's cottage, and the pale blue smoke from the peat fire that crept slowly up into the still sky above the dark fir-trees, there was not a sign of any human being ; the Park itself was full of

sound of bird, and scent of furze ; hens were clucking and scraping diligently, and a ridiculous starling perched on one of the trees was listening intently to a thrush's song, with his head on one side, and his mind fixed on endeavouring to copy the notes the moment the song ceased, and he could get a chance of making himself heard ; while every single branch seemed to have its own especial songster, that sang, as if rejoiced to see Jacinth and such a June morning together ; and was endeavouring to make the most of the occasion.

Presently the voices of her brother and the old keeper were apparent, as the owners thereof came out into the air and began to approach her.

"I tell 'ee what I'd tell none else," said Crumpler, in the broadest of broad Dorset, which, however, will not be reproduced here, "and you take my word for 't 'tis true ; when I heard from John, as was in Barford

yesterday, that you'd won all they prizes, ses I, the parson's the man for me, and I'll give him the tip, the straight tip too ; and what's more, sir," he added with an obvious effort, "I'll do for you what I never thought to do for no man, I'll come to Church, for the man as knows the points of a dog as you do, must know all about t'other place ; and you look out for me a Sundays, sure enough I'll be there," and he winked his eye solemnly at Bob, and then gave him a hearty smack on the back, that made even that stalwart parson quiver a little as he turned and shook hands warmly with his patron.

"That's good hearing," he said, cheerily. "I don't know which will please me most, your receipt for distemper or your coming to church. I can't be as careless as they make out in Fulbrook, eh ! Crumpler ? if you'll come and hear me preach ; why it's years since you were in Bevercombe Church, isn't it ? "

"Thirty-five, if not thirty-six years, come next 'first,'" replied the keeper, rubbing his hands. "Last time th' old parson preached; poor soul, 'twas his last 'first'; and when we buried he, and all the hounds went to the funeral, and I stayed outside to mind 'em, and that don't count, I said, ses I to Mariar, 'Next time I enter them doors, Mariar, it will be in my coffin, for the last good fellow in the Church is put away this day, and I'll ne'er sit under a chap as can't handle a gun, nor doesn't know pointers from setters'; and give yer my word, Mr. Merridew, if the feller who came before you knew September from any other month; and he was that afraid of hydrophobia, he wouldn't go within a mile of a dog. That's the sort of chap they think good enough to tell us all about Heaven. It can't be much of a place if such as him was a private key. Howsomdever, he's gone, and joy go with him, and you've come; and now I'll run up and look at them dawgs of yours

We'll try 'em as soon as ever we can ; those young 'uns will need some breaking."

" Is the Squire at Littlecroft yet?" asked Mr. Merridew, after a moment's pause.

" No, not yet ; but one of the new lodges is full," said the keeper, shaking his head, and glancing at Jacinth. " You and me's family men, Mr. Merridew, and don't hold with such ways ; but I can't pretend not to know what silks and satins and curly 'eds looking out of the lodge windows mean ; and since Squire Wylliams have been our Squire, it means, too, he'll be down among us shortly. There's rumours about that this new young lord has a chance for Barford ; and that Talbot's is going to the wall. Such news as that has roused the old lion, and you'll soon see him a-driving his black horses with a face to match. He'll look you up, and were I you, I'd send young Miss there off to school ; he's a rare eye for a pretty face, has the Squire, and girls are better out of the way of such as he."

"Why, here's an early bird!" exclaimed Mr. Merridew, as he perceived an unmistakably gentlemanly figure coming down the path under the trees. Then, as he came near enough to be recognized, he added, "Why, it's Lord William, in the enemy's preserves ; he's coming to ask for your vote and interest, Crumpler, you may be sure of that."

"Which he'll get nither one nor t'other," replied Crumpler, rubbing his hands together as if preparing for a fight. "I excuse low folks for going Liberal and interfering with other folk's children, with their education hacts and their rubbish, but I've no patience with such as him, brother to a duke and every advantage, and yet can't let us alone. We don't bother our heads about him ; why should he come worritting to know if our boys and girls go to school ? I call it right down cheek. You may say as he pays ; well, who wants him to ? Not me, for sure. And

I say as how I'm the best judge of my own children. I know 'em pretty well, and they don't want more learning than I can pay for myself."

Then, as Lord William came up to the little group, Crumpler hunched up his shoulders, plunged his hands deeply into his pockets, and with a "Good morning, Mr. Merridew; I'll be up at the kennels about noon," he marched into his cottage and slammed the door, and could be heard grumbling violently at some one, as Lord William, raising his hat, spoke to Mr. Merridew, and asked information as to the way to the great house; while Jacinth, very conscious of the old hat and a pair of venerable tennis shoes that had seen better days, looked past them both, and devoutly wished herself miles farther away from civilization than even she was at present.

"The squire has not returned home yet," said Mr. Merridew, after introducing his

sister to the young fellow, who was looking admiringly in her direction, “and you are miles away from Littlecroft. This is Bevercombe Park, the last remaining relic of the Bevercombe family, who once had a house here, it is believed, but whose monuments in the church are the only things we have to remind us they once existed. Now Littlecroft is comparatively a new place, and lies the other side of Bevercombe ; to reach it you must pass my house, so pray come back and have breakfast with us. We came up here to interview Crumpler, who had sent for me, or I can assure you we do not, as a rule, breakfast at this unreasonable hour at the Vicarage,” and, looking at his watch, Mr. Merridew beckoned to Jacinth, and they all hurried home, as if suddenly remembering the breakfast that Mrs. Merridew was lamenting over gently to herself and Brian, as being completely spoiled ; a lamentation renewed doubly to herself alone, when she saw their

guest ; and recollected the over-frizzled bacon, and that there was no more nearer than Barford ; while, with the contrariness that seems to afflict all country house-keeping—or, indeed, any house-keeping very far off the region of shops—the newest eggs had been sold the very day before, and there were none in the house save the three or four that had been slowly congealing ever since half-past eight ; when the punctual maid had appeared with them, solemnly proceeding to ring the bell as usual, although she knew perfectly well her master was absent, and that he could not possibly hear the summons.

But Barbara was too much of a lady to apologise, and bidding Brian run and pick some strawberries, she handed Mr. Merridew the post-bag, and then proceeded to pour out coffee in the most matter-of-fact way possible. “Here’s a letter that concerns you, Lord William,” said Bob, presently, laughing over a communication on an extremely large old-

fashioned sheet of paper ; “ it is a mandate from the Squire that you are to be chased from our precincts, and given the cold shoulder on every opportunity. He says he has sent the same order to all his tenants, and concludes by asking me to solemnly curse you from the pulpit, as an inciter to theft and an underminer of the morals of the people. You see you are a dangerous character, and as such to be avoided.”

“ A regular old Tory Squire,” exclaimed Lord William, as he took the letter Mr. Merridew handed him, and hastily glanced over it. “ I really did think the genus was extinct, or was to be met with only in books.”

“ You mustn’t call him a Tory Squire,” replied Bob, “ for he’s been all shades of politics ever since I knew him, and as he’s over eighty, I don’t suppose I have heard of half his vagaries. His politics are a mere matter of temper ; last election he was pink

all over, because he had quarrelled with the Talbots ; now the Talbots and Verikers are in favor he is as blue as he was pink, and he means to come down and oppose you personally, because you are supposed to represent the teetotal party in the House ; and if there be one person detested by the old lion of Littlecroft, it's a teetotaller. His prejudices—not any attempt at politics, on a wide basis—govern him entirely, and it's likely enough he'll order all his tenants round again to your side, if Herbert Talbot manages to tread on any of his corns between this and the election ; so if you can manage to incite him to do so, you had better, for unless you can, I am afraid you have not much chance.”

“ But surely in these days of the ballot-box his orders can't have much effect ? ” asked Lord William, anxiously, biting the end of his long, fair moustache. “ He must have learned emphatically that the days of coercion are over, and that a man's vote is as secret——”

"As all the rest of a man's doings and sayings are," interrupted Bob, easily. "A *secret de polichinelle*, my dear sir; can anyone do anything, someone won't find out in these days of ours? If so, I should like to know that person, if but to beg for the receipt. Why, I had only a couple of telegrams and a letter yesterday, about my success at the Birmingham Show, and every soul in Barford knew of the triumph of old Roses' sons long before I did. The very ostler at "The Bear," touched his hat, and said, "Wish yer joy, sir!" before I had opened the messengers of good. And the same with one's vote; there's so little to talk about round here, we're obliged to tell our own concerns. I only know one man of whose political convictions, or lack of them, I never could be sure."

"And who is that?" asked Lord William.

"The doctor," replied Bob, laughing heartily. "He always assures both sides, in

the strictest confidence, that he has voted for their candidate, but begs for the same secrecy on their part, because if their rival heard which way he had gone, he would be ruined; both sides believe him, and in consequence he makes rather a good thing out of it, and yet for the life of me I never can make out for whom he really does give his vote. Why, old Wylliams tried getting him over to Littlecroft, and poured as much wine into him as would have turned most men's heads, but he kept up his air of pompous mystery to the very last glass, and was taken home, smiling patronisingly, but still secret, though I am sure he was quite as tipsy as most owls are supposed to be."

"Scandal! scandal!" said Mrs. Merridew, lightly. "Why, the doctor is your dearest friend, and never was known to be tipsy in his life. But we all get spiteful at election times, Lord William, and in consequence you must not believe half what Mr. Merridew

says ; besides, though you might not think it from his talk, you are among enemies, and Jacinth and I shall think it our bounden duty to use anything and everything you may say against you, in every possible manner."

"This is dreadful," exclaimed Lord William, laughing, as he hastily rose from the table and pushed back his chair. "You can't be serious, Mrs. Merridew ; you are too much of your age, surely, to be Conservatives—at least, Mr. Merridew is not one, I am convinced."

"He is the black sheep in our white flock," replied Jacinth, speaking for the first time ; "even Brian is true blue, and shouts for 'Talbot for ever and ever,' in a way that suggests a mixture of politics and prayers that is rather trying, but we have hopes of Bob ; he does not like teetotallers, and while smiling secretly on the disestablishment of the church, refuses distinctly to rob a poor man of his beer ; now beer is conservative or

is nothing, so, as I said before, we have hopes of Bob."

"Well, Bob is no good, as you know," replied Mr. Merridew, "for Bob's principles won't let him vote either way, so all you can do is to keep Brian in the right path, in order that you may have a representative in the future; and now, Lord William, if you are as tired of politics as I am, let us go out and see the gems of my parish, the dear dogs ; that's to say, if you care about dogs, and I hope and trust you do."

"Will you come too, Miss Merridew?" asked Lord William, when he had assured his host that after politics and political economy and other trifles, he adored dogs more than any other thing. "I see you despise me for being a Liberal, but I assure you we are nice when you know us, and I feel convinced we have many things in common : for example, I see you take interest in this education question ;" and he

turned over a collection of small brown manuals ; or, Short Roads to anything ; the very thought of which, on ordinary days, Jacinth had been heard to declare made her feel positively ill ; but which she had been industriously covering with brown paper, to save the over-worked fingers of the board-school mistress.

"One is forced to take interest in everything here," answered Jacinth, ambiguously ; "it's the only thing that keeps us alive. I'm really sorry I cannot come out now and be converted, Lord William," she added, after a moment's pause ; "but I have my work to do, and a dozen things to see after. You mustn't think our life here is all play, because you found us in Bevercombe Park before eight this morning ; we don't often indulge in such dissipation as that ;" and shaking hands with Lord William, and adding a few words about meeting at the Manor-fête on the seventeenth, Jacinth ran up stairs.

leaving her brother to escort the candidate for political honours over the kennels, where he was very soon as profoundly bored, and out of his depth, as ever he had been in all his life.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

LORD WILLIAM PETERSFIELD was essentially the outcome of the latter part of the Nineteenth Century ; and rebelling emphatically against all the old Conservative bonds, laid by his family for centuries upon the people, went so far in the contrary direction, that more than once his brother, the Duke, had seriously consulted the family lawyer about him ; and much as he disliked speaking of anything that might appear to be a flaw, in the magic circle that in his eyes hemmed in the family, and kept it sacred and distinct from the rest of the world, had actually on one occasion been so worked

upon by his brother's vagaries, that he had contemplated a very private lunatic asylum ; only grieving that the good old days were over, when such a tiresome relation could have been comfortably put out of the way in some deep dungeon ; or sent off equally comfortably to the wars ; with strict orders given to his faithful squire to see he did not manage to come back again. In fact, Lord William's conduct resembled nothing so much as that of the early Puritans, whose minds, revolting from the worship of carven images and the tawdry finery of the Romish Church, caused them to hew down marvellous priceless monuments, to smash beautiful stained glass, tinted by time's fingers, in a manner no other hands can effect, and to desecrate and destroy Cathedrals, in the belief that by so doing they could do away with the evils of priest-craft ; while they fled for worship to white-washed barns, where snuffling through the nose superseded the all

too alluring chant; and blasphemous familiar orders to God to attend to his children's requests, replaced the equally blasphemous but more respectful prayers to sundry guardian saints; supposed to act as interpreters between the Almighty and the world at large. As in the Puritan days, so in ours.

The modern reformer, sick of shams, weary of society's iron bands, sees nothing, save the symbols of these in the commonest courtesies of life; and in his revolt against undoubted evils, loses sight of as undoubted beauties; the while he tears up the clothes he possesses, at a risk of indecency, before providing himself with others to cover himself withall.

There was nothing Lord William had not investigated in his search after reality; nothing he had not plunged into as deeply as a son of a duke ever can; for such an one must always be hampered by the sense of birth that stands between him and the world at

large, as an impassible barrier ; and that if he forgets himself, is never forgotten by those beneath him. And he had roamed through the mystic fastnesses of agnosticism, socialism, and in fact every ism almost ever known, until he had finally settled down into a *bona-fide* Liberal, intent on the regeneration of the world ; because he was quite sure it was to be effected, as he had found one individual in it superior to every inducement of worldly glitter and worldly pelf ; and therefore might presumably be able to discover yet more who were like his one specimen : clear as crystal, flawless as some perfect jewel, and truthful as the lady herself, who is popularly supposed to reside at the bottom of the well.

In his research into some details respecting the laws regarding women and children's work in the factories, Lord William had met with a girl, whose deep blue eyes and softly folded dark hair—guiltless of the dreadful fringe, or sticky vulgar arrangement so

dear to the heart of the lower class female, as displaying to her mind emancipation from the cap of servantgalism—seemed to suggest she was capable of higher things than those to which she appeared condemned by mere accident of birth.

Lord William took every opportunity of studying the girl more as a type than as an individual ; but he was roughly recalled to the fact of her flesh and blood personality by a remark from the overseer, who had his own notion of morality ; and saw nothing in his lordship's investigations that was not the usual thing when a pretty girl was in the question ; and though Lord William's indignation almost took a physical form, the overseer's words and smile rankled and in time brought forth the proposition that “Ower Greïce,” as Grace Harbuckle was always called, should leave her frame and go to school ; finally emerging from that retreat

as the future Lady William and the possible mother of a duke.

The flutter in the factory was immense, as was the flutter in the family of Lord William; but while his brother seriously contemplated the asylum, as mentioned before, the owner of the factory made so much fuss over him, flattered his vanity so egregiously ; and the girl's people, and, indeed, all the inhabitants of Blackboro', made him into such a hero, that his fate would undoubtedly have been sealed there and then, had not Grace herself kept her head amongst all the stir, and had plainly informed Lord William, in bucolic but forcible language, that she was already engaged to a man in her own rank of life to whom she was deeply attached, and that she should abominate an existence into which long dresses and bonnets entered largely, and where she would never be able to enjoy herself, or have five minutes freedom again.

Her earnest affection, her utter refusal to

be dazzled by any promises of fine clothes or jewels, were so real, so very true, that Lord William, with a sigh, passed out of her life, the richer for having known one true, good woman ; the poorer by several months of wasted time, and by the loss of all his brother's confidence in him and his capability of looking after himself; while all his vagaries, his honest search after an ideal life and an ideal companion, ceased to be to his brother anything save farther evidences of his lunacy, and were no longer looked upon indulgently, as the efforts of youth to live nobly and do good work, which in time would soften down and become really useful and practical when reduced to working order, but were regarded as so many individual and personal insults to the family, and as such to be resented, and if possible to be punished.

His last and worst offence was that he had been elected to stand, in the very ultra-Radical interest, for a borough situated in the heart

of the Duke's own country ; and what made this doubly offensive was the fact that, owing to purely local matters, he had an undoubted chance of success.

He had been left a large estate and the delightful income of £25,000 a year within the last few months, by a relative as eccentric and curious as he was, and had already made himself immensely popular in the neighbourhood, among the farmers and labourers, by a refusal to preserve game, and by remitting, for the benefit of the workmen, a royalty he had from certain large clay-works, from which about £3,000 of his income had formerly come ; while the Talbots, once the great landed gentry of the neighbourhood, were in very straightened circumstances, owing principally to a fine old English love for racing, and a pig-headed obstinate refusal to go with the times, that showed itself in abusing every reform, and refusing to take advantage of it. And in consequence of this,

and a fatal manner they had of offending every one of their supporters, the moment an election was over, by forgetting them instantly, were in such evil odour, that no one outside Stanton-Talbot ever expected Herbert Talbot to be member for Barford ; and all who dare speak openly prophesied and prayed for Lord William's success, though his politics were considered dangerous by those who thought of them at all ; and none could really believe in Barford being represented in Parliament by anyone save a Talbot.

Woodyhide, as Lord William's estate was called, was situated in the very heart of the Fulbrook district, a district unique, in itself, and that deserves a word or two of description.

It is cut off from the mainland by a beautiful winding river, and consists of a double range of hills, one facing inland; and the other sheltering a long low fertile valley from the sea and the tremendous wind-storms

that come rioting down the channel, strewing that iron-bound coast with many a wreck. The population is composed of about thirty farmers, whose lonely farm-houses strike profound melancholy into the soul of a casual observer, who gazes at them from the top of the hills, and remembers long dark winter afternoons and evenings, and the more than possibility of a wet Sunday ; of a great many clerics, all as narrow-minded as their narrow parishes, and of a few land-owners, all one-ideaed in everything, from the correctness of Conservative views, to the utter wickedness of Liberals and Dissenters, at whom and at whose doings they gazed from their fastnesses, as the ordinary individual looks at any strange but noxious beast, as if wondering how far its vagaries may be put up with, before one is obliged to kill it and to have done with it.

To these dull, but immaculate folk, Woodyhide had always been something more

than a mere eye-sore. The John Petersfield who had left it to Lord William, had been eccentric too, and had been a thorn in Fulbrook's side ever since he had lived among them ; but his eccentricity had put him outside the pale of society, a situation that agreed with him perfectly ; while Lord William, young, rich, handsome, and, above all, marriageable, and with nothing save rumoured eccentricity against him, must be called upon, and asked to those parties, which for orthodoxy, dulness, and propriety, are unmatched in any other place in England.

For marriageable might mean so much to the fast fading group of spinsters languishing among the Fulbrook hills ; it might mean society, the world of London, and an introduction into the giddy whirl into which one of their number, the eldest, had once plunged, when rents were high, corn dear, a war on, and things perilously hard

for the peasant were flourishing mightily for the peer ; but she had returned unfettered by any engagement save to her dressmaker, whose unpaid bills followed her down to Fulbrook, and resulted in proceedings that renders the words “County Court” impossible to mention before poor Laura Compton, who has nothing but unpleasant remembrances of her one season in town, of which, however, she is not ashamed to speak in a manner that Fulbrook calls beautiful ; but that Barford, where the case was heard, sometimes stigmatizes beneath its breath as shameless effrontry.

It was towards the heart of this district that Lord William turned his horse’s head after his breakfast at Bevercombe Vicarage. It was a long ride—fourteen miles at least. He had canvassing to do on the way, and many things to think over before he reached home, where he was to receive a deputation at luncheon, and where he hoped to find plans

for building the convalescent home for over-worked London clerks, which was his present hobby, and for which he destined some of the accumulations of Mr. Petersfield's long thrifty life, regardless that the Duke's lands were heavily mortgaged, and the Duke's seven daughters all too lightly portioned for their position. But instead of finally settling in his own mind, as he had intended to do, whether separate sitting-rooms should enter into his plans, or whether one big chamber should suffice, Lord William, to his dismay, found his thoughts straying from prosaic bricks and mortar to a remembrance of Jacinth Merridew, as he saw her first, under the shadow of the beautiful, peaceful, pine wood, in her simple striped print dress, her old hat, and her slender, lovely feet carelessly thrust into the venerable tennis-shoes which would have given another less romantic, visionary man a positive shock when he recognised the untidiness thereof, but which appeared

to Lord William as a proof positive that he had once more discovered that *rara avis*, a woman without vanity or ambition as regards raiment—a simple-minded soul, who thinks nothing of herself or her appearance !

And here was one in a position in life that even the Duke could find nothing to sneer at.

That mysterious ægis that in country society is cast by the church, was over her ; and if her father were better forgotten, her mother came of a noble family, well-known to the Duke, and which would at once prove to him that Jacinth was good enough even for a Petersfield ; while her own sweet face and distinguished figure, and manner of moving, would make their own impression, should it be necessary to go to London occasionally, and would grace any position, should the Duke die without any other heirs than the numerous little daughters, who ran about Cumberledge, and were as so many separate sorrows to the ducal pair.

because of their sex, and because, healthy and joyous as they were, nothing could turn them into boys.

Premature as were such thoughts and dreams about a girl in whose presence he had been so short a time, and whose voice he had only heard twice or three times at the outside, Lord William found it impossible to refuse to dwell upon them.

To him there was something entralling in the mere glance of Jacinth's eye and the turn of her small head, round which the luxuriant wavy hair was softly and artistically folded, in an arrangement that appeared the work of a moment, but that was, waviness and all, an occupation both of time and thought. The graceful manner in which she used her hands and arms had not escaped his watchful eye, while the way in which she listened without forcing herself and her ideas prominently forward, all tended to indicate a receptive mind, waiting for that other intellect

—masculine—stronger, more powerful in every way, that should lead her own the while it expanded genially, and became indeed the help-meet fit for that of an ambitious man.

Jacinth's easy refusal, too, to accompany him and Mr. Merridew round those most distasteful kennels (alas, poor Bob!) had added fuel to the gently-rising flame.

Of course, she had work to do ; of course, dogs could afford her no more pleasure than they did him ; and though Mr. Merridew had shown him with pride the seven red and white setter puppies Jacinth had brought up by a bottle and immense care, when the mother died, and had expatiated from the point of view of the dogs' value, on what her care had done for them, Lord William saw in this only her loving anxiety for her brother's pocket ; and agreed with him, that it was a wonderful thing to do, even while he gazed at the lumps of fat, whose soft, white paws

and broad foreheads, and slobbering mouths, were one and all recommended to his notice, as containing evidences of future greatness.

Thinking of Jacinth, the long straight seven miles into Barford were soon passed ; the familiar green walls of the little town were entered ; the town itself left behind, half-asleep and dreaming in the warm and scented silence of a June mid-day ; and then began the slow upward climb towards Woodyhide. The sticky clay road, emblem though it was of the riches below his horse's feet, gave Lord William a little more occupation than before, as regarded his steed ; and by the time he had arrived at the top of the hill, and paused for a moment, before making the descent towards the shady corner near the sea, where Woodyhide House lay, he had once more recollected his convalescents ; and as he rested his horse an instant on the summit of Carbarrow, he looked round him to see if he could fix the

site where, if all went well, Jacinth Merridew should lay the foundation-stone of his home, on a day that he had fully determined should not be far distant.

Beautiful Carbarrow ! who that recollects thee can refuse to bless the whole of Fulbrook ?

Even Lord William, who had not been impressed by the hospitality, or rather the lack of hospitality, in the district, could not refuse a deep breath of admiration as a tribute to its charms ; while as he gazed at the gorse, the newly springing bracken, and the heath-set pools of shining water below his feet, and felt the wonderful air, he registered a vow that no longer should the place be sacred to its old inhabitants, but that all its glories should give new life and health to the toil-worn clerk ; who should carry back the view from Carbarrow as a talisman to conjure with, when the office grew heavy with foul air, and the eye grew weary from gazing at

the long, long rows of figures in the all too familiar ledgers.

As Lord William looked round his eye fell on the gaunt, cold, gray stone house, where the Talbots had lived for more generations than they could count, and where, during all those generations, a Talbot (and, in fact, a brace of Talbots, until the passing of the Reform Bill had made it impossible) had sat for Barford.

Why, the very gorse on the hills was supposed to be yellow in accordance with their views; and though some people suggested the July and August flush of pink heather might therefore point hopefully forward to a day of Liberal ascendency, the Talbots were so accustomed to speak of the heath as purple, that, like true Conservatives, they stuck to their one idea, and refused to see the undoubtedly roseate hue of the hills, once the heath began to blossom, attracting myriads of bees to drink of their honeyed

cells, until the hills were sonorous with their lazy song, and the whole district redolent of the syrup, which is like nothing else save itself in the whole country.

But the sight of Stanton-Talbot reminded Lord William that not only would his deputation now be on the way to Woodyhide, but that he had been bidden for that very night to one of those banquets, into the composition of which in the middle ages poison would have very largely entered, and to which he had been invited, not as a candidate for parliamentary honours, but as a new-comer to the district.

Indeed, among the whole Fulbrook set, his candidature had been gently treated as a somewhat feeble joke.

Ponderous clerics had heavily “chaffed” him about his fancy for startling them with rumours of a contest; the Comptons, Wynyards, and Saltherthwaites, the farmers, and even the farmers’ wives, had ventured to

remark that of course Lord William was not serious in attempting to stand against a Talbot ; while the fact that Barford had declared to a man for him, in consequence of discovering that Fulbrook had had dealings with co-operative stores, regardless that the only way to obtain a country tradesman's vote is to expend money at his shop, simply rendered the chance of his success still more ludicrous in their eyes ; for they knew quite well they had only to drive into Barford a month or two before the writs were issued, and give their orders with all the unconsidered lavishness of folk who only expect bills rendered once a year, and a year's credit beyond that, to once more attract waverers into the fold ; while Lord William's openly expressed opinion that a man's vote and his conscience should in some measure accord, indicated to them that they had nothing to fear from his superior income and his avowed horror of anything like debt. For they relied

on long experience of county-electioneering tactics, which are nothing if not dishonest and coercive for success, and laughed at their rival's uprightness and simplicity, while they inspected the lists with their henchman, the lawyer in Barford, to whom was intrusted the delightful task of cultivating the constituency, when Fulbrook chose to forget it, and whose memory could be relied on to supplement the weak and most convenient one that was a county possession.

But though Lord William was honest and painfully scrupulous, he was young, and had an immense faith in the real goodness of human nature.

So firm was his belief that the true man that exists in every individual is a good and perfect germ of future possibilities—so ardent was he in his credence in the purity of people's notions, and in making the best of everyone he met or spoke to—that it was impossible to be long in his society without being impressed

with his particular theories, and without coming gradually to believe, as he did, in the intrinsic value and goodness of each God-made soul.

Even Barford, venal, gossippy, selfishly ignorant Barford, could not refuse to believe in a man who asked for their votes for the Liberal party, and refrained from one word of abuse of the other side ; who had nothing but good to say of Herbert Talbot ; and whose name began to be associated with every charitable and kind action in the district ; and whose conduct about the clay-works removed a long-standing grievance at once ; while Herbert Talbot's coarse invective at the market-table anent his quixotic foolery, had only caused the poor to turn against him more than ever, and had brought down upon him a rebuke from one of his father's oldest friends that would not easily be forgotten.

But despite faith and patience, and a continuance of good works, Lord William

Petersfield could not help being intensely lonely at times.

He had separated himself from his whole family, or rather alienated himself from them by slipping out of the family groove ; the people who supported him were the middle classes only ; the clerical element turned its back upon him ; and he had literally not one individual of his own rank or standing in the district, or even in the whole county, to support him ; for a dread of the Duke, and what is always called “the thin end of the wedge,” prevented all of them from associating with him on comfortable and anything like equal terms.

As he rode slowly along the beautiful steep avenue that led down to Woodyhide, he began to feel curiously melancholy as he recollected the big lonely house, and the long, long years that were before him there. Even the probability of Parliamentary success did not seem so delightful as it had done when

at day-break he had ridden off to see old Squire Wylliams, in the hope of obtaining his support, before he had promised it elsewhere ; and as he reached the long low house that looked singularly unattractive by reason of the absolute lack of creepers on the plain weather-stained stone front, he thought how differently he should feel were someone —he would not say Jacinth even to himself— to come running down those old mossed steps, to ask how he had got on with the Squire, and what he had seen and done, to whom he could confide his plans, and from whom he could ask and obtain the sympathy, advice and approbation, which, independent of all, as he wished to be, he would not have been human had he not occasionally craved for.

The big, square, undoubtedly ugly dining-room, its unattractive mahogany and leather furniture, just as his old relative had left it ; its dirty faded family portraits, considerably

spoiled by being solemnly washed by the housekeeper herself, every spring, with warm soap and water ; its stiff sideboard ; its crude and gaunt curtains, looped up with faded cords into folds so perpetually the same, that the red material had faded decorously in such a manner, that there could be no doubt of the proper style of their re-arrangement, when taken down and shaken, and put up again ; and finally its hideous green carpet all struck him, as they had never struck him before, as he contrasted them with the flowery pleasant room at the vicarage, where taste had done what money never can, and where life, young life, permeated the atmosphere mysteriously, and gave the air of cheerfulness, unpurchaseable in any shop, and that is as undoubted as it is indescribable.

Could young life ever come to those gloomy rooms ? little feet ever trot in the long oak passages, and little voices make the low rafters ring ? could prettycheerful surroundings

replace the gloom and ugliness, that, man like, Lord William felt, but could not particularise? could love, rosy-laughing love, fly gallantly about Woodyhide, mocking the pigeons in the trees, and gathering the roses in the garden, where the ghost was supposed to walk?

The staid, smug tradespeople who composed the deputation sent out in the "Bear" waggonette from Barford to solemnly demand Lord William's private opinion on some question of local self-government, would have been considerably astonished could they have known how Jacinth's deep brown eyes and soft brown hair, her pliant figure, and charming presence, drifted between them and their candidate. They would have been amused, perhaps, had they known that the casual sight of the small brown primers at Bevercombe Vicarage was accountable for Lord William's fervid defence of the School Board's system of education, and they would

have certainly been surprised, if they were capable of so being, after the enormous luncheon they all managed to dispose of, could they have seen all their statistics and neatly drawn-out minutes and resolutions bundled hastily into a drawer in the yet more dismal library, while Lord William drew out a large photograph of a girl in a plain soft merino dress and small white apron, and gazed at it long and silently, comparing it with the gracious vision of the morning, seeing in Jacinth the truth, candour and earnestness that had caught his fancy in “Ower Greace,” plus gentle birth, breeding, and the low sweet voice that had been denied to Grace, and that seemed to him worth so little while his brief infatuation lasted ; but that were precious indeed when in the possession of one with whom he had fallen undoubtedly in love at first sight ; and which would be all in their favour, did that blessed day ever come, when he could

present the woman of his choice to his mother; a woman who would satisfy her fastidious tastes, while supplementing and agreeing with all his dearest theories about a man's other half, and the purity and sanctity of marriage.

If Lord William had not been roused to the consciousness of the fact that the Talbots dined at the charming hour of six-thirty, as a proof of their refusal to pander to the taste of the day; and that he had still to dress; he might have continued dreaming all the evening, but the clock on the mantel-piece struck the hour and reminded him that he was still in his shooting-coat; and he hurriedly put the photograph back into its hiding-place, and came back into the present with such good effect, that at the Talbot dinner he made himself so charming to Miss Compton, who had come prepared to freeze him by reason of his politics into a sense of his wickedness, that on the drive home in the

covered waggonette, she gave vent to such Radical sentiments that her father promptly told her not to speak like a fool, and her sister giggled and said it was easy to see who had perverted Carry.

Alas ! for Carry, Lord William was at that moment pacing the terrace at Woodyhide, as he smoked his cigar and watched the moonlight lying on the sea between the sheltering trees, dreaming of Jacinth and of some fairy-land which they might one day inhabit together, with all the fervour of a man who may have had fancies for other women, but who undoubtedly had never been in love before.

CHAPTER V.

“SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT? ”

IT is easy, especially at election times in the country, for people bent on meeting, to see a great deal of each other in a comparatively small space of time.

Indeed, strictly speaking, it is rather difficult for individuals not to meet, and as Lord William, after the one dinner mentioned in the last chapter, was almost ostracised by the good folks of Fulbrook, because of his politics, and of his avowed intention of invading their fastnesses with a Convalescent Home, he soon found his horse’s head turning to Bevercombe Vicarage, rather than to other more aristocratic quarters, and began to

develop an amount of knowledge of the points of a dog, that in time actually broke down Crumpler's attitude of hostility and caused him to declare that for a Radical, he was a pretty decent sort of a chap after all.

"You'll be voting for me yet," said Lord William, laughing, as he balanced himself on the corner of Mr. Merridew's carpenter's bench, and watched the Vicar and Crumpler inspecting four lovely setter puppies, whose mother sat regarding the business with human-looking eyes, which appeared to divine that separation between her and her children would in some way ensue from their deliberations. "You see I unhesitatingly picked out the best of that bunch ; surely now you can believe my politics may be right ?"

"I believe you mean well," replied Crumpler, "and I bear you no malice ; but dogs is one thing and politics another. It may be right and all that sort of thing to

divide up the land and do away with the gentry ; and I am not saying but what we should have a little more and they rather less ; but there's the dogs and the birds, to say nothing of the hunting ; if the one goes, t'other 's bound to follow, and I can't abear the idea of it all. Why, what 'ud become of we ? Keepers for generations, and fond of the beastesses, and known to 'em too for centuries. Oh ! it's all rubbish ; the whole lot of it. You stick to your line, my Lord ; you're born to a decent name and place, and you can't get rid of it. 'Taint nature, 'taint common sense, to make classes equal ; and until you changes your note, you'll have none of my vote, I can tell 'ee.”

“ Now look here, Crumpler,” said Lord William, impelled to argue, as are all politicians, whether their case be hopeless or not, “ you can't say for one moment that Lord Westerham was right to clear out all the small tenants in Fulbrook, because they

disturbed the game ; surely they had as much right there as the rabbits. At any rate they were not half as numerous."

" Right or wrong, he took on several more keepers," replied Crumpler. " What's one's meat 's another man's poison, you know. Fulbrook 's a dull, unhealthy district ; and they're doing better elsewhere. I do hear it was hand to mouth work up on them hills. No, my Lord, your Lordship won't have no votes from me ; the game laws and me's working together," and with a duck of his head, Crumpler sauntered out into the yard to have a talk to the stable-boys before wandering home to Bevercombe Park.

" And yet they scoff at the idea of a Conservative working-man," exclaimed Lord William, when he had gone out of the "shop." " I should like to exhibit Crumpler at some of the socialist meetings in Marylebone, for I am afraid he would never be believed in if I only spoke of him. What a

difference between his placid content and the surging misery of the London workman, who seems to me to be only waiting a signal to rise and snatch what richer people have withheld from him so long. I wonder what makes the difference."

"Stolid indifference to anything save peace, quiet, and a full stomach," replied the Vicar, quietly. "Oh! Petersfield, you don't know what you are doing when you come down here with your new notions, your iconoclastic ideas. It's like letting in blue sky and clear air into a vault, which, however, must be closed once more by the hands that first made the locks and bars. You're not strong enough to keep the vault open; the demon custom and the innate selfishness of man, that ordains that with possession of any sort, the first idea is how to keep, not how to share; the flukyism that forms our several relations, are all against you Liberals; and it's a brave soul that dares

to be one in such a nest of Conservatives as we are here ; still you'll have to give in ; your very name is against you ; we shall see you a shining light of the other side yet."

"Now I did not expect that from you, Merridew," replied Lord William. "I am not a lad ; I am past thirty, and the older I grow the more determined I am to do all I can for the suffering world around me. I don't talk socialism one bit. I don't believe in our dividing our goods and all starting fair. I only believe in being an honest steward of what I have. I don't suppose I shall ever get any reward. I don't think I want it, though of course I should like fewer curses from my peers and a little less suspicion from those beneath me in the social scale. Yet I have faith in my future being what it must be if I only do what's right ; at any rate, if I could only be less distinct among those I want to benefit, I should be glad. That's the saddest form of socialism—

that miserable suspicion of our intentions ; that unhappy idea that because we have five shillings to their penny, all the good we try to do them must mean our own benefit.”

“That idea is not confined to town though,” said the Vicar. “We all share it here. I am as much a black sheep as you are, Petersfield, because I dare to be different to the orthodox parson, and I feel every word you say. I wonder if there will ever come a time, when our efforts to do a little good will be recognised, and not instantly condemned, because they are not the ideas of our grandparents.”

“As usual, wondering!” said Jacinth Merridew, coming gaily into the workshop out of the blinding light of the June sunshine, and standing for a moment in the dark entrance, with all the lightness behind her. “Well, for once we are agreed, Bob! for Barbara and I are wondering too ; and our wonder takes the prosaic form of wanting to

know if you have ordered the village fly for the festivity this afternoon. I am not going to flaunt my new frock behind Jock and Jinny ; a new frock to me is too serious a matter for that, you know."

" By Jove !" exclaimed Mr. Merridew, jumping up. " I had forgotten all about the whole thing ; it's well you reminded me, Jacinth ! I'll be off. You talk to Lord William for ten minutes ; I won't be longer, and he won't mind being left. Take him round to the front and show him the new rose, it's worth the drive from Barford to see that only." And catching up his soft felt hat, Mr. Merridew rushed off, just too late to hear Lord William say : " That's too bad, really, Miss Merridew. I brought the phæton over on purpose. I thought we should all drive over to the Manor together, and have a pleasant, not to say jolly afternoon ; now all my hopes are blighted."

" Come and see Bob's rose," said Jacinth

irrelevantly. Then, as they walked down the moss - walk, bordered on each side by thousands of pinks, white and faded mauve, and filled with clumps of good old-fashioned flowers, the delight of Bob's heart and his bees, and the scorn and derision of every other rector in the country, she added : “ You must know that would be impossible, Lord William ; Barbara can't go ; and think how Barford would talk about Bob's vote, if he gave you such very open countenance ; besides, I should never think I could arrive at the Powell's unsmashed if I drove behind a Radical team ! As it is, you are here so often, that we were honoured by a call from Squire Wylliams last night. I couldn't repeat what he said of you and your ultimate destination, but he led us to believe that he could unfrock Bob for giving you luncheon. He is a dreadful old man. I don't know which make me shiver most, his oaths or his compliments.”

“ Does he dare to compliment you ? ” said Lord William, watching Jacinth’s pretty hands, as she removed the funny little white paper umbrella which her brother had erected over his last hobby, for fear the pretty pale cheeks of the beauty should be too warmly assailed by the noon-day sun. “ He is a man I would never allow my wife or sister to speak to. I wonder Merridew didn’t kick him out of the house.”

“ Well, he can’t quite do that,” said Jacinth, brightly, as she lovingly caressed the beautiful newly-opening bud of the prize rose. “ He is our Squire ; for two pins he’d drop every subscription he gives to the charities in the village ; he’d set up an opposition to our services on Sundays in the shape of cock-fighting or beer-drinking ; in fact, I don’t know what he is not capable of—he is a small king in his way. Oh ! we have a great deal to be thankful for in our landed gentry, Lord William ; especially when they are like that specimen ; to annoy Bob, he’d turn out every villager in the place.”

"Like a stage villain," said Lord William. "How can such a man be tolerated in these days?"

"What are we to do? We cannot afford to fight him; he knows that well enough," replied Jacinth; "and things might be worse; he only threatens—other people act; they don't seem able to stand anything coming between the wind and their nobility. I often long to uproot them, and set them down in London. Think of Hubert Talbot there; I fancy he would be rather out of it."

"And yet you call yourself Conservative!" exclaimed Lord William, laughing. "You evidently are not aware that you are dangerously on the border-land, and that you will very soon sympathise with me, and my projects. I want to see this petty tyranny done away with. I want——"

"Simply to change it for another still worse tyranny—that of the masses," replied Jacinth. "But," added she, after a moment's pause, "I vowed to myself that nothing should induce me to argue with you; or,

indeed, with anyone else, on a subject of which I am sure."

"Why not allow yourself to be converted?" asked her companion. "You should surely give yourself a chance of learning the error of your ways; besides which, you know there's always a chance of your converting me."

"No; that's just what there isn't," replied Jacinth; "I can't argue—few women can. We feel intuitively that we are right. We believe in our principles as a species of special revelation, which ceases to be revelation, you know, did we try to hand it on elsewhere. But we can't explain; we jump at the conclusions which you men reach ultimately, but all too slowly, because you examine each step you must take before reaching there. But they are the same conclusions after all. We feel rather more than we can explain. Dr. Fell—those celebrated lines about Dr. Fell must have been written, I am sure, by one of the sex. What a curious thing, by the way, is personal atmosphere!"

"I don't think I know what you mean,"

said Lord William, tentatively. "Personal atmosphere is ——"

"The peculiar subtle influence thrown out by each individual as regards other folk," replied Jacinth. "I mean, for example, the different atmospheres different people appear to me to generate. Barbara generates calmness and peace, Bob jollity, good-will towards men, excellent temper; you generate thought; others I know generate sourness and crossness; and others still affect me so disastrously that I positively cannot stay in the room with them; and there are some people whose presence makes me belligerent, and with whom I fight at once; while others have an opposite effect, and make me feel peaceful the moment I see them. I never change my first-formed opinion of any one, so emphatically am I influenced by personal atmosphere."

"And what is your favourite atmosphere, may I ask?" said Lord William, smiling.

"Bob's first; Barbara's next," replied Jacinth, smiling too. "I come down to breakfast cross;

don't, please, contradict me politely, Lord William. I generally, if not always, come down very cross, and Bob's sweet nature, permeating the breakfast room, soon sets one right again: if one's worries are real or fancied, he has always another view of them to put before you. Oh, if ever I marry, I hope Providence will give me a husband with Bob's sweet temper, brilliant spirits, and keen sense of the ludicrous! In such an atmosphere as that, one can't help being happy and good. He and Barbara are thrown away upon each other; they should have been parted, and given each to some less happy disposition—thus two homes would have been perfect, instead of one. You will think me silly," she added, with another laugh; "but I don't think anyone appreciates them properly; and it maddens me sometimes to see Bob sneered at in his turned coat, and Barbara, in her old-fashioned dress, passed over by people who are not worthy to unlatch their shoes. Fortunately, they

neither of them wear shoes, and so don't require them to be unlatched."

"I see you are hyper-sensitive, Miss Merridew," said Lord William. "I for one don't believe Bob is ever sneered at. Yet what if he is? It must indeed be a small nature that could sneer at a man whose life is as noble, and whose work is as good and honest as is his. I have been much impressed by the manner in which the whole village regards him—as a real gentleman. And let me tell you, no one finds out the reality or sham of a so-called gentleman more readily than does your dweller under a thatched roof. I would never have believed in their keenness had I not heard them talk; and your brother seems to have won their hearts. His stories, too, are so excellent; in fact, I think I am almost as fond of him as you are; his tastes may not be mine, but they are healthy and amusing too to watch."

"There's one taste we have not yet examined, and that is his rose. This, you must know, he has evolved himself by grafting,

or some process I do not understand," said Jacinth. "This is to help the dogs to make that fortune the dear boy always means to find before he dies. It is to be called the Barbara, and is to take the first prize at the Palace show. Now, I wish I, too, could pin my hopes upon a rose, and interest myself only about such simple things as please Bob and Barbara ; but I can't, I can't ; and I long to get away out into the world."

"It's as well you don't pin your hopes on this rose," replied Lord William ; "for see ! here's a beetle eating out the heart already. What a beautiful green creature it is ! Who would think it could do so much mischief ?"

"How it clings on too !" exclaimed Jacinth, as she seized the hard glittering beetle, and drew it out of the blossom. "I think we have taken it off in time. Those rose-beetles are Bob's torments ; but then he draws morals even from them, and declares rose-growing would not be half as entralling as it is were he always quite sure of success. He says those rose-beetles remind him of some wives,

who fasten themselves on a man’s heart only to destroy it; but that’s only when he wants to try to make Barbara cross. Needless to add, he never succeeds in doing that. To hear Bob talk sometimes, one might believe no one thought less of matrimony than he does; but even this doesn’t move Barbara. She is too sure of him to be cross, as he deserves. But you will tire of hearing our family history; and, besides, it is almost time to think of the Powells’ party. I, at least, have to dress.”

“Can’t you go as you are?” asked Lord William, with all the ignorance of a man who sees a fresh clean frock, and does not know if it be print or silk, the latest thing out, or the fashion of the year before last. “I am sure no one at the Manor will look half as nice as you do now this moment;” and he gazed admiringly at Jacinth, whose handsome face and figure were certainly as independent of toilet accessories as ever a woman’s can be.

“You little know what you are saying,” said Jacinth, merrily, “nor what profound depths of ignorance you are disclosing. This

is my very worst frock, and only disentombed from the parish drawer because I had no faith in the summer; and only bought a garment that was equal to either fortune, in the way of weather; but with my usual luck the summer is exceptional, and I am consequently, as regards raiment, ‘up a tree,’ as Bob would say. Now, last summer, I had actually two new light frocks; and, in consequence, the cold was arctic, and the rain incessant. Do you believe in luck, Lord William? I must say I have been compelled to do so myself.”

“It’s very hard to define luck,” replied her companion, smiling at her confidences; “but I can’t say I do. I think luck means success, according to one’s capacity for obtaining it. People of small capacity have little success, and then they declare they are unlucky. Others, more gifted or more persevering, pass them in the race; and then they say: ‘Oh! but so-and-so is always lucky.’”

“That’s not quite what I mean,” replied

Jacinth, knitting her brows; “it’s more than that. If I, for example, buy a dress or a pair of boots, they are sure to wear out at once, though I take every care of them, and spend hours in selecting them; while Lady Margaret Spencer, who is rolling in riches, buys her things carelessly and they last years, to my certain knowledge. Some people don’t really want this or that, and it falls into their lap, while others who long and pray for the very same things never get a glimpse even of them. Luck to me is a regular Puck—a Robin Goodfellow—and is a very real and tangible being. Now, as a family, we are not downright unlucky, but our particular fates always stop short just before success. We are always not so much miserable, or poor or unhappy, as we are not quite rich, not quite successful, not quite in an assured position; in fact, we have just a kink in us, that commands we stop short just before success.”

“I wonder what you would call success?” said Lord William, “or what would be your

idea of, to use a vulgarism, a slice of luck just now?"

"You must promise not to sneer if I confide in you," asked Jacinth. "Well, then," as he bowed gravely in consent, "listen. My idea of a slice of luck would be a really pretty frock for this afternoon, new French shoes and gloves, a great deal of admiration, and a nice proper carriage to go to the Manor in. Now, my luck has ordained a *chef d'œuvre* from Miss Florence in the village, and a vehicle that is called a trap or a four-wheel impartially; while the shoes and gloves are British to the back-bone. You see my wishes are simple; it's hard they can't be gratified, is not it?"

"You must take it philosophically," replied Lord William, laughing, "and believe it is because your hopes are not high enough that they are not gratified. That's a solution I once heard to the problem of disappointment. Our hopes are not fulfilled because they do not soar boldly, and therefore we are not to give up hoping, but rather to increase our

desires. A most comfortable idea, is it not, and one worth trying? I should advise you to wish for dozens of dresses instead of one, then perhaps your luck may come. But here's Bob. Well; have you chartered the vehicle?" added he, turning to Mr. Merridew, whose handsome face bore a perplexed look, that was easily explained by his saying: "Woe is me ; or, rather, woe is *us*, Jacinth, I forgot the four Miss Sampsons. They had ordered the shay for the Powells days ago ; and there is positively nothing before us, if you still refuse to tear up to the Manor behind my tandem. You can't walk five miles comfortably ; and the heat and dust are somewhat appalling."

"Vote or no vote, my luck is in the ascendant," exclaimed Lord William, joyfully. "Then it is not for nothing that I drove the horses over this afternoon ! Come, Miss Merridew, go and instal yourself in your new frock, and let us set off. I shall gain at least twenty new constituents now the Vicar is publicly on my side."

"After all, I don't think I care to go," said Jacinth, lingering. "It will only be wearisome work at the best; tepid ices; bad music; and the same people all wearing the same inane proud smile, that one meets everywhere. There won't be even the excitement of meeting you, Lord William, which was our one inducement to accept the invitation when we received it three weeks ago."

"Oh! you must go. There are to be several London folk, so I am assured by Mr. Powell," said Lord William; "he implored me to come early to assist him receive them. He's got two or three literary men to help work up the election for me, notably Mr. Francis Seymour—that new fellow—who's making his fortune over the *Wasp*. I can't think how old Powell has persuaded him to come all this way. He's rather difficult to catch, even in town, and at this distance his appearance may be classed with the wonders of the world."

"What name did you say?" asked Jacinth,

in a low voice, while all the blood in her body seemed to rush suddenly into her face, which she strove to hide by bending it once more over Bob's new rose.

"Don't smash my fondest hopes, Jacinth," exclaimed her brother, carefully adjusting the umbrella once more over the Barbara's fair face. "Lord William spoke of the *Wasp*, the sting of which has penetrated even to these parts. Don't you remember I brought out a copy from Barford, and Barbara burned it, declaring it was too spiteful to live for five minutes in the house of a parish priest? I didn't mind, for I had read it, but if I remember rightly someone else wasn't quite as resigned; and someone else secretly bought a copy all for herself, to see the evil of it."

"And someone else only wished she could afford to subscribe regularly," replied Jacinth, carelessly recovering her wonted composure. "I never had ten minutes of such perfect enjoyment before. It was like old times to read of who was painting what; and what plays

and books were coming out. I should have been doubly interested had I known that the editor was an old friend. Now, I shall recall myself to him, shake my rags of poverty in his face, and propose that he sends me the paper free, gratis, and for nothing. I am sure he will do so on the spot. What years it is since we met! Do you know anything of him, Lord William?"

"He's a man all the world knows everything about; and he is immensely popular. He married Flora Petersfield, my fifty-third cousin," continued Lord William, "and that's well nigh the only thing that puzzles folk about him. She is stupid, makes an utterly useless hostess—and he generally entertains at his club—and has nothing but money to recommend her; and Seymour can't want her paltry £1,000 a year, for he must be making at least £4,000 himself. True, he may have wanted connection. I don't know anything of his family, while I suppose it is something to be able to claim cousins with my brother, the Duke; and

Seymour is, as you know, if you know him at all, a fierce Tory, and his paper is run on those lines; though he is eclectic enough to give other people a chance occasionally; and doesn't disdain Liberal pens, always supposing they are sharply pointed enough to reflect credit on his columns; so I suppose it was the Duke's influence drew him over to Flora's side.”

“Does not her father own a tremendous quantity of property somewhere or other?” asked Jacinth, her voice shaking a little, for she had not been prepared to hear her old lover was married. “I remember Flora quite well; but we always thought her—well, rather soft; in fact, quite out of the running, to use one of Bob's pet speeches; and she used to sit and smile by the fire, or in the sunshine, and seemed to us to require nothing else. I can't believe the Francis Seymour I used to know has married her.”

“It mayn't be the same fellow, of course,” said Lord William, carelessly. “But her father has not only property, but influence,

of a peculiar kind. He owns ships and telegraphs, and is always working up some new company. You can easily find out though, Miss Merridew, as he is to be there this afternoon ; which is more than we shall be, unless we start soon. I don't know how long you take to dress, or at what time we are expected at the Manor, but it's past four, and Mrs. Merridew is looking severely down upon us from a top window."

Jacinth glanced hastily up at her sister-in-law, who was holding up her watch for the inspection of the lingerers, and then saying carelessly, "I won't be any longer than Bob," ran up stairs, and began her process of dressing by casting herself down on her bed, and clasping her hands tightly over her heart, as she thought once more over the past, and wondered how she and Francis Seymour could contrive to meet as if nothing had ever been between them. The five years that had elapsed since their parting seemed as nothing ; and Jacinth felt once more the warm tender clasp of the long slender brown fingers

of her lover, and almost heard the tones of his voice, as he murmured his love-vows in her ear. Then, rising from the bed, she opened the small secret drawer in her desk, where reposèd the few sacred relics of her old life, which she yet retained. There was his photograph ; how noble he looked ; how handsome in the brown velveteen coat and red tie, at which Issy always sneered as Bohemian ; and which Jacinth, at seventeen, regarded as the only perfect costume for the male sex. Ah ! the Francis Seymour who married Lord William’s silly cousin could not be her Francis ; and recalled to the present day, by the striking of the library clock, Jacinth put away the photograph with a sigh and turned to her dressing, which was never more impatiently performed than when a new costume once more drew her attention to her altered circumstances, and caused her bitterly to recall how she had looked in her Bond-street gowns, which were one and all “created” for her ; and to contrast her appearance then, with what it

was, now she had to clothe herself in the *chef d'œuvre* of the village dressmaker, who seemed to possess one pattern only for fat Mrs. Jesty at the public-house, and for Jacinth herself, as far at least as regards the backs and sleeves, which she declared had all such a family likeness to each other that she should know Miss Florence's cut if she met with it in the wilds of Australia; and, knowing quite well that she could never look anything save "clothed—"she could not certainly be "dressed" in her new garment—Jacinth put it on hastily, and ran down stairs, looking so lovely and so fresh, that Lord William became more hopelessly in love than ever; and Bob whistled a whistle of amazement, adding: "Well, really, Jay, I must say that you pay for clothing! You ought to have a new frock at least once a month."

"Instead of once in two years," said Jacinth, as she settled herself in the luxurious seat of the beautiful phaeton, by Lord William's side. "However, don't please

speak of clothes, Bob; I mean to enjoy myself this afternoon, and I can't do that if I remember my garments; I mean to forget them, and be independent of such vanities for once; at least, as far as any unfortunate woman can be. Now, Lord William, please set off; to-morrow you will hear that Bevercombe is all right as far as the election is concerned, while we shall have another visit from the Squire.” And waving her hand to Barbara and the children, who were watching them away, Jacinth turned to her charioteer, and for the five miles between the two houses a merry conversation was kept up so vigorously, that the groom, who was seated by Mr. Merridew’s side, confessed to his stable friends, “that his ‘art were fairly in his mouth; and ‘ow they never reached the Manor safe, he, for one, could never explain.” However, they managed even the difficult sweep between the rhododendrons, and round into the front of the house most satisfactorily; and were duly greeted by the Powells, with whom

they had scarcely exchanged civilities, when Jacinth's heart bounded wildly, as a familiar form caught her eye, and a still more familiar voice said : " Miss Merridew, after all these years ! I little thought what a pleasure was before me when I accepted Mr. Powell's invitation to come down here for the election."

CHAPTER VI.

“THE PAST WAS FAIR; THE FUTURE
FAIRER STILL.” .

THE confusion that Jacinth could not avoid feeling, strive as she might to conceal the fact, caused her to receive Francis Seymour's out-stretched hand in silence; and as she returned his greeting, the scent of the heliotrope in his coat recalled line for line, word for word, their last meeting, until she began to feel as if the past were a dream, and she were still a girl of seventeen, to whom this man was as a very god, and in whom still beat the passionate heart full of love that up to this moment she had deemed was dead to anything like sentiment.

As in a dream she heard old Mr. Powell

rating at the Tory sentiments which would prevent Mr. Seymour from giving their cause the assistance he had expected to receive from a man on whom he had lavished much help in by-gone days, and who might be supposed to be willing to sink anything like principle in the gratitude that he must feel towards an old-time benefactor. But naturally, the *Wasp* was beyond such sentiments as these, and would rather cease to be, than help on the side of democracy, irreligious and iconoclastic sentiments, that represent the Liberal party in the minds of those who refuse to see any good thing in a cause with which they have nothing in common ; and as in a dream she listened to the enquiries made by Lord William about his cousin, until she heard Mr. Seymour say quite carelessly, "Oh ! Flora ; she is not here ; she is in town ; she fancied one of the girls was going to have measles. Poor Flora ! she has not an idea beyond her nursery at present, and can't understand how I can appreciate anything save discussions on 'tops and

bottoms,' or the relative value of different patent foods for infants. She'll outgrow this weakness in time, no doubt, but at present she is infatuated with number three, and I can't get her to stir from its cradle."

"Were you ever here before?" said Jacinth, hastily and irrelevantly, feeling that these nursery details were more than she could bear; "or do you know our county well? I call this the most neglected county in the world; and I am sure few Londoners have any idea of our beauties, or we should not have them to ourselves in the way we have. Of course you've been into Barford, and been over Carbarrow Castle? The first questions we ask everyone are, 'Have you been to Carbarrow Castle? and don't you think it twice as lovely as Kenilworth?' and as they are always answered in the affirmative, we need hardly pause for an answer."

"Our county!" said Francis Seymour, smiling, "*our* Castle! Do I hear you, Miss Merridew, talking as if you too were one of the aborigines of this benighted spot? you

who were a Londoner of the Londoners, and to whom the very idea of the country, save as a place where roses could be grown for decorations, was repugnant in the extreme? Surely I must be mistaken, and you cannot be the Jacinth Merridew I used to know, and who was such an ardent cockney, that she continually stated that she would rather live in Seven Dials than in the most exquisite spot in the world, if it were ten miles from town. You must indeed have altered strangely if this be you, verily and in truth."

" You forget how people always change," replied Jacinth, carelessly. " I assure you I find myself taking far more interest in the domestic concerns of our villagers than I ever did in the development of nations when I lived in town. Why, Rhody-Jemimy's new dress gives me more to think of than the whole season's books and pictures used to do. There's nothing like a country life, Mr. Seymour; believe me, even you would be converted did you live among the wild

lovely moors and marvellous colouring of our own Dorset. You really must ——”

But here Jacinth's eloquence was brought to an abrupt conclusion by a hearty peal of laughter from her brother.

“Oh! Jacinth, Jacinth!” he exclaimed, looking first at his sister's flushed and animated face, and then at Mr. Seymour's astonished countenance, “do I hear you talking indeed, or has someone stolen your voice and appearance from you? If you are indeed yourself, may I ask what has caused this rapid conversion? It is as sudden as old Secker's in the village, who was saved immediately, and for a good hour and a half, by the Salvation Army's noise and clamour. Do, please, explain why you have ceased to vituperate your fate, and envy even the guard of the Barford train, because he actually sees London nearly every day of his life. You must either be temporarily deranged, or have seen the error of your ways remarkably quickly.”

Jacinth bit her lip, and looked extremely

annoyed at her brother's interruption, and she was about to reply sharply, when Lord William interposed : "I shall begin to think my eloquence has converted Miss Merridew," he remarked, lightly. "I have pointed her out Dorset beauties in such a persuasive and touching manner that she cannot refuse to acknowledge them any longer. Why, she never saw Dead Man's Pool until I showed it to her, Merridew, and had positively no knowledge even of the Herony at the mouth of the harbour before I told her of it ! How could you expect her to be resigned to her fate, let alone appreciate it, if you had not introduced her to all that makes life desirable in the wilds of the country ?"

"She had Bevercombe Park and the dogs," replied Mr. Merridew, laughing, "and only pride prevented her from seeing anything else ; but she despised Jock and Jenny, and only condescends to them now because other people, who shall be nameless, declared donkey - driving required the diplomacy of a statesman, and the eye and

nerve of a distinguished physician to make it a success. However, far be it from me to cavil at the cause; I am only too glad to know of this pleasing effect to be contumacious. Why, when the dogs have made my fortune, we shall find Jacinth so profoundly attached to her country home, that she will refuse to leave it.”

“By the way, Mr. Merridew,” said Francis Seymour, “I, too, have heard of the dogs, and was much struck by your cheery paper on ‘Shooting Picnics,’ in last week’s *Squire*. Ah! I know who wrote it, though of course it wasn’t signed in full,” he added, smiling at Bob’s start of amaze. “I happened to be in charge the week you sent that up, and a few judicious enquiries resulted in telling me that you were the brother of my old friend, Miss Jacinth Merridew, and I really think I came down as much to secure a good sporting pen for the *Wasp*, as to circumvent Lord William’s nefarious plans against the Queen and Constitution. The Duchess won’t mention your name, Petersfield, and even

Flora wept a family tear over your address."

" Powell told me the *Wasp* had been squared," replied Lord William, easily ; "aren't you something of a wolf in sheep's clothing, Seymour ? "

" Just a wee bit," answered Mr. Seymour, candidly ; "but I wanted several things, and only old Powell could help me to them, and without answering questions he never asked, he could not have known on which side I was pledged to live and die, for he had never seen the *Wasp*, poor benighted man, and only recollect ed me in the days of my youth, when I was rather 'redder' than Robespierre, and out-socialisted your socialist of the present day, mightily. For one thing, I much wanted to appropriate Mr. Merridew's pen ; for another, I have never seen a country election ; and for a third, well, never mind the third ; these two reasons will be enough for you, won't they ? " And Mr. Seymour bowed sarcastically to the two men, the while he looked at Jacinth in such a manner, that she

could hardly avoid knowing, or at least guessing at the third reason for the journalist's appearance in Dorsetshire; and she was going to make some remark, when Mr. Powell fussed up and drew away her brother and the Liberal candidate, to be introduced to some members, of what the old fellow called ‘the hopposing henemies,’ leaving her alone with her lover of by-gone days.

The grounds of the Manor being the very newest of the new, afforded no opportunity of hiding one's light under a bushel, should one so desire it; for despite the fact that the architect had insisted on a certain number of the fir-trees and undergrowth being left to remind Mr. Powell of the beautiful knoll he had purchased because of its loveliness: to say nothing of its distance from his native soap works; and which loveliness he had destroyed as soon as ever he could; the whole available space set aside for the afternoon party was carefully railed off from the rest of the property by a particularly barbed and aggravating wire fence, by the special desire

of the keeper, whose superior knowledge of sport and somewhat crudely repressed disdain for “foreigners” and “business folk,” rendered him master of the situation in the eyes of a man, who was shrewd enough to see that he could only buy his way into the society for which his wife and daughters were pining ; and that his only chance of obtaining and keeping a footing there lay in lavish expenditure, and in a generous support given to sport, on the subject of which he knew nothing, and about which he cared less.

Under these circumstances, the barbed fence became a *sine qua non* ; and even had Jacinth felt inclined to wander away with Mr. Seymour, down the slippery path under the trees, or among the rhododendrons, planted with a generous, if ignorant hand, with an eye to covert for the pheasants, which flatly refused to avail themselves of the sticky and unsatisfactorily shelter they afforded, she would have been unable to do so without an immense effort ; and despite her natural nervousness at the *rencontre*, she had to stand

on the billiard-table-like lawn and continue the conversation in the centre of the crowd, in the best way she could, conscious that several lynx-like eyes had already reduced her costume to its proper level as a Barford manufacture, and that several eligible young ladies had already formed their own opinions of her outrageous conduct, as shown in her driving up with Lord William, and were whispering under the shade of sundry lace parasols, over her most unconventional and improper behaviour.

“How is it that I find the exclusive Miss Merridew in this Radical haunt?” asked Mr. Seymour, as he handed Jacinth a chair, and took another himself, under the temporary and unsatisfactory shadow cast by an immense Japanese umbrella. “Surely, your principles have not altered with your tastes, and I have not to deplore your perversion in politics, as well as in other matters? See, how long is it since we met? I have quite forgotten when we had

our last talk." And he paused lazily, as if waiting for Jacinth to prompt him.

For a moment she could not speak. Ah! how well she remembered. She lifted her eyes to his face, but could not open her lips. In a second their glances met, and Jacinth knew that Francis Seymour did remember; aye, quite as well as she remembered herself.

"Then you, too, have not forgotten, Jacinth?" he asked, almost in a whisper. "Ah! why did you send me away, as you did. Our lives are both spoiled, and for no earthly reason. I can read your heart, just as I used to read it, and I know you are rebelling against this narrow country life of yours. Ah! why, oh why cannot we recall the past?"

"Not for one moment would I do so," replied Jacinth, proudly drawing up her pretty head, and recovering her self-possession in one moment. "Your affection would never have stood the shock of my father's death and losses. You were, and are still, no doubt, ambitious; I, far too proud to accept all, and give nothing in return. Believe me, I am

really happy. I am thankful for my past, which was as good as it could be, for a few weeks ; but I am still more thankful for my future, which is going to be quite as good in days to come. We are old friends, Mr. Seymour, even if we were old lovers. Let us remember the friendship, and make the most of it, in the few moments we have together ; but we must forget everything else, in justice to me, to say nothing of Mrs. Seymour and the babies. Shall it be a compact ?" and Jacinth held out her hand, waiting for Mr. Seymour to take it.

But he did not seem to see it, and without taking any notice of her proposal, he said : "I feel like a man who has grasped a shadow and lost the substance. Bear with me just for to-day, Jacinth, and let me talk to you this once as we used to do. Nay," he added, as Jacinth half rose from her seat, and appeared as if she intended to leave him ; "you can trust me ; I am a gentleman always, even if I cannot help remembering you were my first love—my first and my

best. Flora is my wife ; and I love her, poor little girl, quite well enough to satisfy her. But a man such as I am has more than one nature. She appeals to one ; you to the other. Why cannot a man love two women as well and faithfully as he can one only ? It is only in this cold, proper England of ours that such things are deemed outrageous and impossible. You cannot have forgotten everything ; you must remember the silver Thames and the lovely perfect June day on which we parted, as well, aye ! and as bitterly as I do ; " and he looked eagerly at Jacinth, whose treacherous heart was beating wildly, and to whose ear Francis Seymour's voice was as the veriest music ; but recollecting as well the calm manner in which he had acceded to his dismissal, the while she remembered that dual loves were apt to clash, and were regarded most unfavourably in society as a rule, she laughed lightly and answered brightly, " I have forgotten nothing, Mr. Seymour ; not even the kind manner in which you received my letter, and acquiesced

in the decision it contained without demur ; and while I do think men are capable of loving two people at one time, those two are only themselves and one other. Now I am sure Flora makes a devoted wife. At all events, I am too proud to share a heart even with her, and when I have one given to me I must have all or nothing. Still, this is ground on which we will not touch. Tell me something about yourself and about the *Wasp*, and when are you going into the House ? I have always expected to see your name in the debates, and have invariably looked out for it."

"Then you did remember me ?" asked Mr. Seymour.

"Of course I did ; why should I forget you?" replied Jacinth. " You were associated closely with the very happiest month any girl ever had. To remember you means remembering a constant procession of fetes, roses, lovely weather, beautiful things ; all that makes life perfect in one's first season. Of course, I remember you. I read about

your gorgeous wedding in all the society papers which I could get in Barford ; and I recollect all your ambitions ; then when you began to be talked about as a rising man, and one likely to make a big mark in the world, I could not help remembering how you and I had discussed your career, and, of course, I plumed myself just a little on having known you. Yes, and I may as well confess it, on having loved you, and on your having loved me. I am none the worse for that short month of happiness, and I don't think you are either, Mr. Seymour ; but you are too superior, I too unconventional and independent, to do that very foolish and most conventional of all things : try to resuscitate a flame that burned down to its lowest and expired some years ago. I would rather hear all you have to tell me about your future, than dwell for one instant on a past that we would neither of us recall for one moment, even if we could, any more than we could call back last night's banquet ; it is a good thing, but it is done with, and there's always

the future to look forward to ; the future is enthrallingly interesting to me, even in Bevercombe, so what it must be to you in town, I can't think."

"Dead Sea apples," replied Francis Seymour, bitterly. "Nay, for once and once only, Jacinth, let us talk out this matter ; let me, as of old, make you my confessor, and let me think that I am once more unfettered, and that you are the ambitious helpful girl I used to know ; let us swear a platonic friendship if you wish, but give me just a little more than you give others ; let me rely on you for the sympathy and help that never failed me in the old days, and without which I have not strength to carry out my hopes and ambitions. A man must be spurred on to success by a woman's hand. It is for you either to make or mar my career. You once said I might always rely on you ; if you are too unconventional to try and resuscitate a dying flame, be yet more so, and become the friend you would have been, had you been my wife ; nay, more even than if you had been

my wife. Domesticity is apt to try one and jar on one's fine feelings. Let us be friends, indeed, and such friends that we can rely absolutely on each other for help ; such friends that we need keep nothing from each other. I know I have a successful career before me ; will you not help me to make this the brilliant success that I feel it will be if I can rely on you, as I once hoped to do ? ”

“ But how about Mrs. Seymour,” said Jacinth, flushing deeply and biting her lips. “ What is to be her part in this future arrangement of yours ? ”

“ The domestic part, the part of house-mother and house-keeper,” replied Mr. Seymour. “ Believe me, that is all she asks for ; all she could undertake. She is an admirable creature where comfort is concerned. She'll give us an excellent dinner, but sits at the head of her perfectly-arranged table in silence almost, and does not utter a word beyond the merest platitudes ; unless the man who takes her in happens to have babies himself and

holds strong opinions on the subject of patent foods, and the proper management of measles. Then her eloquence is quite beautiful. She manages my house and my children well ; her father has immense influence, and on the whole I would not have it otherwise. My house is a peaceful spot to return to when I am utterly wearied, and have only the material half of me to think about, but when the spiritual part asserts itself and I yearn for a responsive soul to spur me on to victory I must not go home ; then, Jacinth, only then may I come to you. Will you give me all that I lack ? will you be the spiritual wife on whom I can rely unfailingly for all that makes a man successful ? I feel I have power, that I shall make a name. Will you not let me find in you, and in your clear head and strong heart, the talisman I lack, the star to lead me on to success ? " and, leaning forward, Mr. Seymour gazed into Jacinth's face and paused breathlessly for reply.

Jacinth leaned back in the chair and pondered deeply. There could be no harm

surely in such a friendship as Francis proposed. Her dull, gray life, bounded by Barford conventionalities, and the possibilities of such gatherings as the one she was assisting at to-day, seemed in one moment to stretch endlessly out before her as it must and would be, were she to refuse to take any interest in the public career of her old lover, and to ruthlessly close the just re-opened page once more, and for the last time throw away the key that locked away the past. Dulness, unspeakable, overwhelming, appeared to enwrap her future as with a garment as chill and impenetrable as a September mist on the Fulbrook hills; and with a scarcely perceptible shudder she appeared to realise this, and contrasted it with the thousand and one interests that would be hers were she to consent to Mr. Seymour's proposal, and take up in some manner the threads dropped from her hands so long ago. Shrewd and clear-sighted as she was, Jacinth had no knowledge whatever of a man's real nature, and there appeared to her to exist no reason why the passionate affection she had

once felt for Mr. Seymour should not become a higher and better thing than it had been in the days when the touch of his hand seemed to thrill her very soul, and when his kiss pressed passionately on her responsive lips appeared to open to her the very gates of heaven ; and believing she had outlived such unreal and unhealthy aspirations, saw no obstacle between them in the new alliance which a keener appreciation of male human nature would have taught her was impossible, at all events between two people who had once openly and ardently confessed to a mutual love.

Jacinth felt again all the wild stirrings of ambition that were once hers for Francis Seymour ; she saw him standing in the House and manfully upholding all the rights and privileges of the Constitution ; she heard words, she might have whispered to him secretly, spoken in flaming and marvellous sentences in the Senate, and she recognised with what immense interest even Bevercombe days might be charged ; had she a

personal interest in the world of life that might only reach her through the medium of the post-bag, but that would at once fill her days and give her an incentive for existence, did she accept Francis Seymour's offer, and became once more the friend and counsellor she had once hoped to be, far more freely and fully than she could ever become, now pretty Flora reigned over his heart and nursed his babies for him in London.

After all, would not hers be the better, more romantic and beautiful part? Matrimony must always mean to a certain extent disillusionment; for what beautiful ideas could survive the daily dinner ordering; the baby-tending that all too often follows the last dying echoes of the wedding bells? while there would be nothing save poetry and ambition now between her and Mr. Seymour. She would help him to make history, the while his wife was sewing on his buttons and ordering his household; and to her should he come when he felt his fine organisation flagging for lack of mental stimulus which he should

never lack at her hands, and which, though she read few books and had never written a line, she felt instinctively she would always be ready and willing to give him. And what was there against this alliance? Nothing. Mrs. Seymour would be robbed of nothing, for what she did not possess could hardly be taken away from her. She would know nothing, and would not be pained by neglect she did not see or feel; and as meetings would be far and few between, society, which invariably scents out a scandal quicker than a vulture does carrion, and invents one on the very smallest provocation ; would have nothing to do with the couple, one of whom lived far from humanity's reach, and the other was a model husband and a frequent father.

The elements of danger in such an alliance never entered into Jacinth's mind for one moment. Neither at first, at all events, were there likely to be any really serious ones, for the distance between them would reduce all sentiment to mere black and white, and neither were likely to indulge in compromising

letter-writing ; for Mr. Seymour was imbued with the belief that some day every letter he wrote might have the feverish interest to the world at large which revels in the scraps and scrapings of any great man's portfolio, which all letters written by a celebrity always have, and was little likely to put a self-forged weapon even into the hands of a woman he had loved ; and Jacinth, believing that she was secure from all love attacks, and that she only looked forward to being in some measure linked with the world that only appeared to her to exist in London, was still less likely to lapse into sentiment that might be as compromising as it would undoubtedly be wrong and foolish in every way. And so she replied quietly, " I see no reason why I should not help you in every way I can, Mr. Seymour, but I hardly perceive how I am to do this. Bevercombe Vicarage is out of the world, you know, and I feel myself gradually ceasing to care for anything. I might have been joking," she added, bitterly, " just now, when I told you I took far more

interest in the concerns of the village than in those of the world at large, but there's too much truth in that jest to make it quite a pleasing one. I dare not know or think too much about London, for fear I should go mad with longing for the old familiar pavements, and the roll of the cabs and omnibuses; and so I throw myself recklessly into the concerns of our washerwoman and our cook's mother, and pretend to myself I never cared for anything else; and I really did not have very high aspirations, even in town. I only wanted to enjoy my youth, and have what the Yankees call 'a good time.' I have no gorgeous plans for aggrandisement; no desires beyond social success; so I fear I shall not be of much use to you; that is to say, if you still aspire to rule the kingdom, and make your impress on an age, in which, it seems to me, everyone makes some sort of mark; and in which the really distinguished people are those who do not want to do anything, either for themselves or anyone else."

"Social success means universal success," said Mr. Seymour. "If we rule in society now-a-days, we rule in other higher places still; but I do not want you to do aught than interest yourself in me and in my work. I may intend to enter the Cabinet before I die; my ambitions may even lead me to aspire to the Prime Ministership, but I do not want you in either place; all I require is someone to understand such an ambition, and to spur me on, when I seem as if I were lagging on my way. Flora only cries if I tell her that some day I shall rule the House, because she says then I shall never be at home at all; but you will understand me, and to you shall I come for appreciation when step by step the ladder is mounted and I am reaching my goal; and you will not fail me?" And Mr. Seymour looked at Jacinth triumphantly and assuredly, while she gazed straight before her, and listened to him eagerly. Then as he paused for a reply, she answered: "I will do all I can, and shall be thankful for an interest outside Bevercombe;

but all the information must come from you ; we have only a second-hand *Times* and the county paper to represent literature ; so you can understand how backward we are here. But Bob can't afford papers ; until my father's affairs are settled we can't afford anything, indeed, except bare necessaries, so you will have to send me the *Wasp* regularly, and tell me all you write in it, or else I shall be of small use to you. We never go to town, as I dare say you know.”

“Why don't you go and stay with the Sandersons ?” asked Mr. Seymour, “Your sister is in an excellent set, and has completely cast the slough of the city in which she was enwrapped at first, and bids fair to have a very pleasant coterie.”

“I don't go because I have no clothes, because I am not asked, and because Issy drives me wild whenever I see her,” replied Jacinth, easily. “Don't you recollect how maddingly earnest and good she always was, and how she always remembered most unpleasant things about me, and reproduced

them at every moment, the more inopportune the better? True, they were only infantile transgressions that she used against me, but I detest being reminded whenever strawberries appear, that I once made myself violently ill upon them, just as much as I detest looking at a hideous photograph she possesses of me done at the age of eight, in a low plaid frock, and showing a pair of long thin white legs, with feet encased in spring-sided gray boots; a correct enough costume then, but one that embitters my existence to know I ever wore. I have a lovely photograph done just before papa died, which I always produce, does anyone ask to see one of me; but Issy will have none of it. She says it is touched up out of all knowledge by the genius who did it, and then produces the hideous white-legged child which I abhor. No! I should love Issy if I could patronise her and over-awe her with my superior rank and wealth; but until that happy day arrives I will give my dear sister a wide berth. She doesn't say much, but has a way of pressing grapes and other

delicacies on one, that cannot help disclosing to the company that she expects I am unfamiliar, except by name, with these things. That maddens me, just as when she issued her invitations to me when I was in town, the day of the proposed entertainment, as much as to say: ‘it doesn’t matter when you get asked, so long as you are asked, for of course *you*, poor creature, have no other engagements.’ To decline Issy’s parties was at one time a distinct joy to me. She was bad enough when I was in town, working at the office. I think I should murder her almost, were I to stay with her. I will wait until I too can catch a rich and eligible husband.” And Jacinth laughed easily, and then rising from her chair, appeared as if she wished to end the talk, which had lasted so long; all the Barford young ladies, to say nothing of the Fulbrook contingent of spinsters, had come to the conclusion that Lord William had had enough of her bare-faced attention, and that she was therefore forced to try her fascinations on the London author, regardless that he

was well-known to be ineligible by reason of his being married. But these conclusions were abruptly disposed of by the manner in which Lord William attached himself to her side, the moment she had come from under the sheltering umbrella, and had said Good-bye to Mr. Seymour. But this was not until she and Francis had made an almost solemn compact of friendship, and had arranged a correspondence which Jacinth could not avoid knowing was a little foolish ; the while she felt it would enlarge her interests, and give her life a zest she never expected would be her's again, at all events while she lived in Bevercombe Vicarage.

CHAPTER VII.

A CALL FROM THE SQUIRE.

ALTHOUGH Jacinth and Francis Seymour did not meet again owing to a sudden summons received by the journalist from the office of his paper, Jacinth's life bid fair to be anything but a dull one, for the election seemed to have aroused the neighbourhood to almost feverish activity, as each party vied with the other in extending civilities to every human being who had a vote, or presumably was possessed of any influence over anyone who had ; and though Barbara had suggested gently that they could not afford flies, even the humble village one, and that it would not do to use Lord William's phaeton as generously as it was offered, Jacinth swallowed her pride, ran recklessly into debt for two new muslins at

a Barford shop; and, behind Jock and Jenny, went to every party she was asked to, thus gathering material for the weekly letters to Mr. Seymour, which were supposed to give the latest particulars of the political atmosphere, or at least as much of it as was discernible from her own especial corner of Dorsetshire, the while she unconsciously made Lord William more and more in love with her, and more and more determined he would win his election and his wife at the same time. Although it must be confessed that his political prospects were none of the brightest, owing to the dogged and indefatigable manner in which the old Squire went against him, and vowed vengeance (despite the ballot) against all those who dared even to look as if they would like to wear the pink rosette that denoted they intended to vote against his last set of political opinions.

Squire Wylliams was emphatically a survival, not of the fittest, but of the old fierce masters of the land who have almost ceased to exist, but who in him actually did

live and breathe up to quite a recent date. That anyone should stand between his nobility and the wind seemed impossible. Immense wealth and a reckless and ungovernable temper, which allowed nothing to "best him," as they say in Dorsetshire, made him a complete autocrat in his neighbourhood, and indeed for many a mile round, for there were few who cared to offend a man who could be as impulsively generous as he was undoubtedly arbitrary and passionate, and who would give lavishly to the Church and Schools of one parish, the while he was as emphatically hunting down the wretched Vicar of another, whose sermons or whose fancied avoidance of the venerable lion had brought down on his devoted head all the vials of his wrath. These idiosyncracies had resulted in a state of things, in Bevercombe parish at all events, that few would believe in had they not witnessed them, as has the writer of this present chronicle. And though Bob Merridew had bravely stood his ground, on many and many an occasion, he had felt

all too often how his influence was undermined, and his work in his parish impeded by Mr. Wylliam's sneers and openly showed contempt, and was therefore impelled to try his hardest to keep the autocrat at bay, or at least in a state of quiescence. Fortunately, Littlecroft had but few attractions for the Squire, save and except during the first few weeks of the pheasant shooting and when an election was in prospect. At such times as these he bore down upon the unfortunate place like a locust, or rather like an army of locusts, destroying all semblance of peace and comfort, and all too often leaving behind him traces of his presence that could never be obliterated ; for the Squire's morals were as old-fashioned as the rest of his conduct and his peculiar dress, and no girl would have accepted service at Littlecroft who had not already taken leave of every vestige of her good name.

Fulbrook, with its belief in the "divinity that doth hedge the county," and its numerous spinsters, was about the only place where the Squire was always received with open arms.

The reverence for their order that caused the denizens of that lovely and lonely district to cling together, and shun outsiders as they would shun the plague or a Radical, even carried them successfully over a particularly flagrant case that came before the public and was severely commented upon in the London press—the county paper naturally ignoring the matter altogether; for the fact that such reports could be published proved conclusively that England's decadence had begun, else surely the Squire of Bevercombe at least had been sacred from the impertinence of any penny-a-liner, who chose to take his name in vain, and remembering that his wife was dead, and that he was eligible; the while the Fulbrook maidens were also recollected, Fulbrook declined to believe the scandal, and opened its arms wider than ever to the Squire when he arrived suddenly at Littlecroft, having found his other place in Yorkshire rather too hot to hold him for some time to come. And yet on such a man as this, and on his henchman, a

small lawyer in Barford, hung all the chances of the election.

Talk as he might, demonstrate as he would by the aid of a sample ballot box and a London lecturer, how the matter was worked, Lord William found it quite impossible to persuade the rustics round Barford that the ballot was secret. What could he do with a set of men who had small tenements and a field or two let to them in such a manner by the Squire, that while they had no right to have a vote really (it was before the days, naturally, of the enfranchisement of the agricultural labourer) they were provided with one in such a way that no one could say them nay, and who were driven in, to record their votes in carriages provided by the Squire himself or by their employer, who would stand at the door as they went into the booth, impressing upon them for whom they were to vote, and who would see someone was waiting at the exit to ask for whom they had voted? An evasive reply or an obvious lie (and the Barford rustics

had not learned to lie cleverly) being promptly punished in a way that served as an example to be held up at every succeeding election for time to come.

Undoubtedly the ballot, and above all the agricultural vote, has made voting as secret as it can be; but elections will never be pure; votes will never be given to the cause and not to the individuals, until canvassing of every sort and kind is made punishable by law; and until a man cares enough for the matter to be able to find his way to the poll without the aid of a carriage provided by either party.

This may appear and is, no doubt, discursive. But electioneering forms such a prominent feature in all life spent in the country, that any story of purely country life would hardly be complete, without some indication of the way in which these matters are managed; while, as this especial story hinges somewhat on the election, it is imperative that some such sketch should be given; or else the manner in which the Barford election was finally disposed of would be hardly intelligible to

the ordinary reader ; who, believing in the liberty of the subject, has no conception of the network in which a whole neighbourhood can be entangled successfully, given a Squire like Squire Wylliams, and a county-town lawyer, like his agent and Jack-of-all-trades, Walter Wycliffe Bodgers, Esq., of the Big House, Barford.

It was this worthy who drove over to Squire Wylliams' house after the Manor party one fine hot morning in July, when the temperature and the Squire's temper appeared to have risen to an almost unprecedented height together, and were at boiling pitch ; the Squire having been roused by a refusal from the Merridews to accept one of his state commands to a dinner he proposed to give at the suitable hour of 9.30, to the Fulbrook magnates, to talk over the prospects of, and to lay plans for the success of the election, which was now almost imminent.

“ Look at that, Bodgers ! ” he stormed, the moment his evil-faced, high-shouldered

confidant walked himself in at the door, and had bowed his Good morning ; “the d——d something, something upstart parson crew, daring to say me Nay ; but I’ll fetch ’em down in a row, and dance upon ’em. How dare they refuse to come ? Don’t even give a reason. Only decline with thanks—here, take it.” And with one final full-flavoured oath, Mr. Wylliams threw Mrs. Merridew’s neat little precise note at the lawyer’s head, and stamped up and down the room, cursing and swearing like a Billingsgate fishwoman.

Mr. Bodgers took the note, glanced over it, and then cast a side look at his patron.

“It’s evidently true, then,” he ejaculated, in a strong provincial accent.

“True ; what’s true ?” asked Mr. Wylliams, stopping for a moment in his wild promenade and glaring at Bodger fiercely.

“That Miss Merridew, the beauty, has captivated Lord William, and that they have all gone over to the opposite camp, bag and baggage,” replied the lawyer, still watching every movement of Mr. Wylliams in his usual

furtive manner. “The Merridews, at least the women, used to be our side of the wall, and he didn’t vote; now I hear Mr. Merridew has sworn to undermine your influence; and as Miss Merridew is engaged to Lord William, of course she’s no good either, and she used to do a lot of talking to the villagers. Then Mr. Merridew has undoubted influence; and as Barford has been estranged for some time from the Talbots, young Talbot’s success is not as certain as it was last time we met. I thought I’d better let you know the talk,” he added, as he noted that Mr. Wylliams could scarcely speak for rage, “and I hope you won’t be annoyed by it, more than you can help;” and he slunk on one side while the Squire raged and tore up and down the room, using language that was simply awful, and which was as original in its vehemence and the amount of curses it drew down on anyone’s head for miles round, as it was undoubtedly unfit for publication.

The lawyer waited, his mean white face fixed like a flint, and as expressionless as a

stone, until the Squire had exhausted his vocabulary of oaths, and had sunk exhausted in a chair, and then he said :

“ Why don’t you go down to the Vicarage and tell ’em your mind ? After all, they must cave in. They have no money, and the schools at least are entirely dependent on your bounty. I should not care to lose the election and to hear them say in Barford that the old lion’s claws are cut at last. Besides, Miss Merridew is too good for Petersfield. Have you seen her, Squire ? Another year as prosperous as the last and hang me if I don’t try my luck with her myself.” And he rubbed his hands and grinned impertinently.

“ You ! ” shrieked the Squire ; “ you dare to aspire to a lady ! Why only the other day you were playing in the Barford gutter with my cook, and making mud pies with your brother, the convict. Don’t forget yourself or your antecedents, my fine fellow. I only took you up because you were so low down ; you could never aspire to equality with gentle-

folks, and now to hear you talk as if you were fit to marry Jacinth Merridew, or anyone else but some decent maid servant, and she'd be too good for you. Oh! 'no offence meant,' you say," he added, as Mr. Bodgers tried to stem his wrath by timely apologies and vows that he didn't mean anything—"well, no offence taken. Order the dog-cart and you shall drive over at once to Bevercombe and hold the horse while I am talking to Miss Merridew. Hanged if I won't go in for her myself and cut out the lot of you. There's life in the old dog yet. Ay, and I haven't forgotten the way to fascinate the women ;" and he smiled and twirled his rough grizzled mustache as if he were still the gay young bachelor he had been something over fifty years before ; and Bodgers retreated to the stable to give the necessary orders, vowing vengeance against his patron, the while he was thankful to have escaped with so little detriment from the consequence of his false step.

Jacinth was seated at her window writing

one of her long weekly letters to Mr. Seymour, when she perceived the old-fashioned four-wheeled dog-cart, drawn by a powerful gray horse, stopping at the gate, which was so close to the porch that there was no way of driving in, and remembering in a flash that Bob was at Barford about some missing dogs, and that Barbara in her worst gown was nursing Betty in some childish ailment, and that she was the only available member of the family at the moment, was about to rush out of the back door instructing the little maid to say, "Not at home," because she would be in the garden, when she heard the Squire shout "Hi! girl! open the door; I see Miss Merridew is in, any way," and realized that Mary's love of peeping had cut away every chance of escape; the while she made a hasty rush into the nursery, and begged Barbara to come as soon as she could to her rescue, else, she remarked, there would be nothing left of her, and then with that cursory review that all women take of their hands, hair, and general appearance before going to confront any

visitor, Jacinth went into the Bevercombe drawing room to talk to the Squire, of whom she was secretly desperately afraid, and with whom she had never exchanged more than a few words, and those only in public, in all her life.

"I was sorry to interrupt you," said Mr. Wylliams, after the first civilities had been exchanged, "but I was very anxious to have a chat with your brother and you; and no doubt your letter was not very important, if it is, will you run and finish it? I have plenty of time on my hands to-day, and Bodgers can hold the horse; he's not like a groom, he can't give me notice, so I shall not mind keeping him waiting. No, he won't put up, thank you," he added, in reply to some polite words of Jacinth's; "he couldn't sit in the kitchen, and you are not likely to allow him in here, so he is better where he is. Where's your brother, eh?"

"He has driven over to Barford, and will not be back until late," replied Jacinth, "so I am afraid you will not see him. He will be

in on Friday, I know. Could you come then, or shall he drive over and see you?"

"Neither one nor the other," replied the Squire, who could behave like a perfect gentleman when he chose; "it is not often a man of my years has a chance of talking to a young and pretty girl, and you must forgive me if I claim the privilege of my age and remain where I am, especially as my errand is as much to you as it is to him. You are taking great interest, I hear, in election matters," and, leaning his chin on his crossed hands, which clasped his heavy gold-headed stick, the Squire fixed his piercingly-dark eyes under the thick gray brows, on Jacinth's face, and paused for her reply.

Jacinth recollected the lively account of the party tactics she had been writing to Francis Seymour, an account in which the Squire himself figured largely, and not in the most flattering way, and flushed guiltily.

"We have so little to occupy us here," she replied, after a moment's pause, "and then, thanks to old associations, I have always

been profoundly interested in politics. My father was a strong Conservative, and insisted on our being able to interest ourselves in his talk; he was in the House himself you know."

"But on the right side," said the Squire calmly, still eyeing her fixedly. "Now, from all I hear, your coat has been turned, and the pretty pink flush on your cheeks is the emblem of the colours you mean to sport on the 29th. Come, confess, Miss Merridew; circumstances have caused me to change my colours more than once. I put the individual before the Cause, you know; and so I am not likely to be very hard on you, even if you have settled in your mind who is to head the poll; and determined, as I am, to bring in young Talbot, I can't say he's worth half what your man is, if you choose them by looks only."

"My man?" asked Jacinth, lifting her eyebrows, and looking the Squire straight in the face. "I was not aware ladies could propose candidates for parliamentary honours. At all events, I can truthfully assure you I

have not done so." And she laughed lightly, and, turning to the table, took up some work lying there and began to stitch at it hastily.

"Excuse me if I ask you to put that down," said the Squire, putting his strongly-marked hand on the work, and making Jacinth look at him again. "I can't bear to see a woman stitch, especially not such a pretty woman as you are; beside which, it gives you an unfair advantage over me. I must put the question plainly to you, I see. I hear you and your brother have gone over; now, please tell me, quite in confidence, how is the parson going to vote?"

"By ballot, if he votes at all," replied Jacinth, smartly, and with an inward consciousness that she had read this obvious retort in some of the papers Francis Seymour supplied her with so lavishly; but the Squire did not recognise it as a quotation, and laughed out. "Serves me right, serves me right," he said, good-temperedly. "Of course I have no possible business to cross-examine you as to your brother's intentions, but still I do hope

you will tell me if you don't mean to help us. We have relied on your assistance in the village and round about—at least, Bodger tells me we have—and I particularly don't want Lord William to get in ; to say nothing of his principles, his family's odious, and I hate the lot. The Talbots are harmless and keep the farmers in their places. If we let such men into the House as Petersfield, we shan't be able to call our land our own in another twenty years, and landed proprietors will have to emigrate, by George ! and work for their living ;" and the prospect of such an appalling catastrophe so overcame the Squire that he swore vigorously and thumped the floor wildly with his stick.

Jacinth could not avoid an expression of profound disgust appearing in her countenance, and she half rose, as if she would leave the room, and then she said : " Perhaps that would not be an unmitigated misfortune. Excuse me, Mr. Wylliams, but I am not accustomed to being sworn at."

" Ah ! you only know the milk-and-water

phraseology of the day, and are only accustomed to the slang and namby-pamby talk of lads fresh from college," replied the Squire, easily; "but there, I'll apologise, I'll apologise. Fact is, Miss Merridew," he added, confidentially, "the present day men have milk in their veins instead of blood, and poor milk too. Now in my young days you'd have been wooed and won months ago ; aye, and carried off too by force if you would not have accepted your lover ; but there's no ambition, no strength, no go-aheadedness in the men we meet now—no ambition. It's all money getting and philanthropy, and grandmotherly government. We ask people their opinion now-a-days ; we educate the lower classes and give them legs up to oust our own lads out of the field. And what for ? To make 'em cursedly bumptious, by George, and to allow them to govern us. Russia is the only country left that's fit to live in, and if we've another Radical Government I'll emigrate, that I will."

" I cannot see what all this has to do with

me," said Jacinth, wishing devoutly that the Squire would go, or that Barbara would come to her rescue.

"Well, I'll put it plainly, and no offence meant," replied the Squire, bluntly. "I hear you and Lord William Petersfield have become engaged to be married, and that in consequence you and your brother are giving him all the influence our side has generally relied on."

Jacinth laughed a little low laugh. "I wonder you have not been told we are already secretly married," she answered. "Have you lived all your life in the country, Mr. Wylliams, without discerning that people are always being coupled together by the gossips? We could not get a fly in the village, and had to accept Lord William's kind offer to drive with him to the Manor party, and this is the outcome. Well, you can contradict both pieces of intelligence. I am not engaged to be married, and I am still a staunch Conservative. Bob has always been a black sheep, but compromises

matters by not voting ; he has enough to do without mixing himself up in politics, he says ; and, with this small mercy, Barbara and I have to be content. I wish I had a vote. I must say it is a great shame I have not, and Bill Stiggins, who beats his wife and gets horribly tipsy every Saturday, has. However, I suppose that can't be helped ; we must look to the Liberal Government, I fear, for the enfranchisement of women, Mr. Wylliams ; the Conservatives are not chivalrous to us, at any rate."

"They don't want women spoiled," said the Squire, gallantly. "No shrieking sisterhood for us. We want pretty, sweet, nicely got-up ladies in our homes, and don't wish to look forward to a race of emancipated females, too learned to care for their clothes, too clever to look after their homes and babies. We want women like you, Miss Merridew, not harpies like Salway's wife at Barford. Bless me, if she wasn't promenading the streets last market-day in a full suit of pink muslin, distributing tracts on the beauties

of the Liberal cause out of her pink ribboned basket, and more than once she harangued the crowd from the ‘Lion’ window. I could have thrown her out, like Jezebel, with the greatest pleasure in life. I can’t think why Salway don’t lock her up for a lunatic.”

“He’s very fond of her, and says she’s been the making of him, and that a few more like her would be the saving of England,” replied Jacinth, wondering when the Squire meant to go. “At all events, she does a great deal of good in Barford, which owes her the baths and water supply, to say nothing of the Cottage Hospital. You can forgive a good deal of pink muslin and a good many political speeches from such a woman as that, I think ; and, after all, if Mr. Salway doesn’t mind, I don’t see why you should.”

“It is my respect for the sex that is outraged,” said the Squire. “The sex which I worship, and which has such an exquisite member as yourself as an example to all others. Miss Merridew,” he added, impulsively, “look at me, I’m seventy-two and as sound

as a bell. I'm an old-fashioned man, and I mayn't be as polished and got up as the young fellows ; but I'm worth a dozen of 'em. I'm fire to the finger-tips, and if you'd encourage me, I'd stand for Barford myself, and oust both Talbot and Petersfield, and then—then I'd lay my laurels at your feet and beg you to take them, and me with them ; " and he rose from his seat and looked as if he was about to kneel on the much-darned vicarage carpet. Jacinth gazed apprehensively at the Squire, and then looked at the bell ; it was some distance off, but another cursory glance showed her the stunted form of the Barford attorney, seated in the carriage, idly flicking the flies off the gray with his whip. He was not an imposing figure; still, he would be some help if, as she began to fear, Mr. Wylliams was either mad or intoxicated. At last she said gently : " The hours of the House wouldn't suit you, Mr. Wylliams, so I don't advise you to stand for Barford. Then think what an awful disappointment it would be for poor

Mr. Talbot. I know he has read Little Arthur's History of England through three times at least, to prepare him for his future career. I recognised the well-rounded periods in his last speeches, which described the battle of Agincourt ; and he has begun to study Macaulay. His brain won't stand so much exertion, if you give him such a fatal shock as your opposition would be. Take my advice, help him all you can, but don't oppose him ; you'd have his death on your conscience if you did ; of that I am sure."

"I'd have more than that to win you," exclaimed the Squire, seizing Jacinth's hand and trying to draw her to him; then seeing that she actually thought him bereft of his senses, he said : "Don't, don't be frightened of me ; it's love at first sight, Miss Merridew. Marry me, and you shall do just as you like with me, Barford and the whole Fulbrook set. I'm an old man—at least I'm getting on—and haven't much time to waste. Say 'Yes,' Miss Merridew—Jacinth, and make me the happiest man in the world "

Jacinth drew away her hand indignantly. "You must be mad," she exclaimed, "or worse. You, a man of your years and reputation, to insult me like this! Go at once, Mr. Wylliams, and never come here again, or my brother shall turn you out."

"Don't talk nonsense, Miss Merridew," replied the Squire, calmly. "I don't insult you by offering you marriage, even if I have only seen you once or twice. You had better think over my offer quietly. I've three estates, more money than you could spend, try as hard as you would, and neither chick nor child—at least, not any that would trouble you—and I feel we were made for each other. I'll go into the House Conservative or Liberal, whichever side you prefer, and together we will rule society. It had better be in the Liberal interest," he added; "undoubtedly that's the winning side."

"I wouldn't marry a Liberal Member of Parliament if I were starving," said Jacinth; even then not believing in Mr. Wylliams' sincerity, and only crediting him with the

insanity that caused her to temporise, until either Barbara came to her rescue or she could reach the bell, without too much of an obvious rush for it.

"Then, by Jove, Petersfield shall get in for Barford; and I'll take him out of the running," exclaimed the Squire gleefully. "I am determined to marry you, Miss Merridew, and I believe you'd have me if he were out of the way. I'd give Merridew the living of Tollercross—it's worth £2,000 a year—and give you such settlements that you'd hardly know yourself. Come, think it over. You can't be over and above happy here. You're too handsome to waste the best years of your life in a print frock, and in a shabby drawing-room. Beaux are scarce in Barford. Think of the Fulbrook old maids. So many finger-posts, pointing out what a hard road spinsterhood is to travel. Could you bear this awful tedious life? No! of course you couldn't. So just think what marrying me would do for you, and your brother too. I'm rough, but I'm ready, hearty and willing."

But I'm old too. I mayn't live long to torment you, Jacinth, and you'd be a handsome well-dowered widow. Come, it's not a bad prospect, is it? Perhaps you'll say 'Yes,' even now ; but take a week to think it over, or a month, if you like. I'm sure you won't get two such chances, and I'd love you as no young man could." And the Squire again tried to take Jacinth's hand, but this time she eluded his grasp, and went to the door. She was quite certain he was mad, and wondered if she should scream for help, or bid him adieu from that coign of vantage ; her hand was on the door, when it was pushed a little, and she stood aside to find, to her intense relief, that Barbara had come to her assistance.

Barbara, cool, collected and charming, as usual ; and, as usual, seeing nothing but what was straight before her. "Oh! you were going, I suppose," she said, after greeting the Squire. "I am so sorry I couldn't come before, but one of the children is ill, and I couldn't leave her."

The Squire turned pale. Where infection was concerned he was an abject coward. He seized his hat and stick. "Well, I must be going ; the child has nothing catching, I suppose ?"

"I hope not, but one can never be quite sure," said Mrs. Merridew, remembering his fears, and seeing that Jacinth was most anxious to get rid of her visitor. "When a child is feverish —" but before she had time to finish her sentence, the Squire was out of the house and in the carriage, being driven furiously away.

"Well, he is a coward!" said Mrs. Merridew, laughing ; "what an abject fool he looked, to be sure !"

"Take care!" said Jacinth, in a queer, shaking voice, that betrayed how near she was to an attack of hysteria ; "don't call him names ; you may be hurting my tenderest feelings."

"What do you mean ?" asked Mrs. Merridew, taking up the work Jacinth had put down, and examining the stitches with the eye of a connoisseur.

"I mean that I have just had the honour of an offer," Jacinth exclaimed, "and I have a month's grace in which to consider the advantages of a match with the Squire, and the disadvantages of a spinster's life, as demonstrated by the Fulbrook women."

"Insolent old fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Merridew, "how dare he?"

"It's really a good offer," said Jacinth; "he'd give Bob a new living and me a new frock; but as I've a month to think it over in, there's no hurry, and I must finish my letter;" and so saying she went upstairs to her room, and found herself concluding her letter to Francis Seymour, with tears falling from her eyes, and in a very different strain to that in which she had begun it. Oh! if only he had remained staunch, she would never have been placed in the position in which she now found herself. If only he had not accepted his dismissal so eagerly, she might now have been in London, the head of a "salon," the wife of one of the most rising and powerful journalists on the Conservative side.

CHAPTER VIII.

PINK AND BLUE FEVER.

JACINTH was sitting in the garden very peaceably the evening after the Squire had made his proposal, and was fast lapsing into a state of slumber, when a terrible racket in the stable-yard announced that her brother had once more successfully piloted Jock and Jenny home from Barford ; and she was just rising from her chair in the hopes of receiving letters or papers by the later post, which remained in Barford undelivered until the next day if no one fetched them, when a familiar voice chiming in with her brother's cheery tones told her that Lord William was with him, and that probably they would come into the garden as soon as the impatient donkeys were unharnessed, and

restored to their stable for the night. She had scarcely resumed her seat when the door opened and the two men came in together, evidently laughing over some joke.

When Mr. Merridew caught sight of his sister, he exclaimed, "Oh! Jacinth, Jacinth, why were you not in Barford this afternoon?"

"For a very good and sufficient reason," replied Jacinth, extending her hand to Lord William in greeting. "I was otherwise engaged; but why should I have been there? Has anything really happened in that stagnant spot? I can't imagine, by the way, what could happen; there's no one there whose death, birth, or marriage would make what Brian would call a ha'porth of difference to anyone outside those evergreen walls, as far as I can remember," and she leant back in her chair, and smiled at her brother's face of ludicrous disappointment at her "don't careishness."

"Unsympathetic damsel!" he exclaimed tragically; "I've a very good mind to keep our news to ourselves. Who, I wonder, always declares that I never tell her anything, and

is rage itself when she presents me with some thrilling village incident and discovers I have known it and forgotten to relate it for even an hour? Well, I won't be too hard upon you, and will give you three guesses, with this leading piece of information, that it has something to do with the election."

"Is Herbert Talbot dead? or has he gone mad over his efforts at assimilating English history and the *Guide to Knowledge*?" asked Jacinth, waking up a little, as she could not help perceiving that Lord William was anxious for her to feel interest in the matter.

"Neither the one nor the other," replied Mr. Merridew. "Come, guess again, Jacinth; it's something to do with the Squire."

"The Squire!" she exclaimed, blushing hotly. "Oh, I know, he has declared for Lord William, and there is despair at Stanton-Talbot. How dare he do it? I should have thought he had a little shame, and could not really turn his coat so readily. If he has really and truly gone over to your side, Lord William, the day is lost, and Barford will be represented

by a Liberal for the first time for many a long day. I shall invest in a black dress, and go mourning until you are turned out. I never really thought Mr. Wylliams was in earnest." Jacinth rose as if to go into the house, looking extremely vexed.

"Don't go in, Jacinth," said Mr. Merridew; "I'm going to fetch out Barbara, and you must stay and entertain Petersfield; in fact, try to congratulate him; he's but a mild Liberal after all—the son of a Duke could never be anything else, you know, and we might go farther and fare worse. He'll tell you of the Squire driving up and down the Barford streets with large pink rosettes on his horses' ears, and a bunch of oleanders in his coat;" and so saying, Mr. Merridew disappeared into the study, leaving Jacinth to entertain or be entertained by Lord William, as the case might be.

Lord William sank down into one of the low basket chairs, and stretched out his length of limb comfortably. "It is a good thing to be able to rest for ten minutes, Miss Merridew,"

he said quietly, “ we have had a terrible day in Barford ; though you are an enemy, as far as politics go, you can’t help sympathising with me, I am sure, over the manner in which these things are managed; Whig or Tory, rank Radical or staunch Conservative, all are alike where electioneering tactics are concerned, and I am beginning to be heartily ashamed of myself. I have to do and say all kinds of things that I can’t bear doing and saying : from shaking hands with that miserable little henchman of Mr. Wylliams, to promising any amount of support to woman’s suffrage and the disestablishment of the Church, and of every public-house in the land.”

“ I thought that the attainment of those three objects was the sole reason why your party existed,” replied Jacinth, easily.

“ But I don’t want to represent any party,” answered Lord William, earnestly. “ I want to be in the House, in order to do some good in the world ; not simply as the mouthpiece of faddists, but as an independent man, able and willing to legislate for the good of the

Empire. The sole reason why the Liberals do not carry all before them, is that they each and all have private fads that they will advocate, or stand or fall by ; regardless of the fact that these things are of small moment when the nation's business is in arrears. What is woman's suffrage, or indeed any subject, in comparison with the federation of the Empire, or the settlement of the Irish question? United to enforce some such gigantic piece of work as that, we should carry all before us, but the electors in Barford are far more interested about the question of teetotalism and free trade, than in anything else, and I have all the Dissenters at me about the Church. It really is awfully hard work, more especially as they can't see that one can be a Liberal and yet love one's Church."

"I don't see how you can," said Jacinth, looking at Lord William in a contemplative manner. "However, I am not going to discuss politics with you, you are a hopeless case ; and I want to hear about the Squire ; he really and truly has turned his coat, then ?"

“Yes, really and truly; and old Mrs. Talbot fainted in her carriage on the Cross, when she heard the news,” replied Lord William, laughing as he recollected the picture the poor old lady had presented, her head on the shoulder of her daughter, and the landlord of the ‘Lion’ pouring brandy down her throat, unchecked by either herself or the sympathising bystanders. “However, she recovered the moment she heard I was passing, and flew at me literally. I really thought I was going to be shaken there and then. Even Herbert ceased twisting his lovely moustache, and implored his mother to go home; but she wouldn’t until she had said her say. Then having accused me of most of the crimes in the decalogue, and seeing I was unmoved by wrath, she tried emotion, and, bursting into tears, implored me to speak to the Squire, for she was quite sure I was the last man in the world to profit by such a mean stratagem; and furthermore remarked if Herbert were beaten at the poll, the whole Talbot family would emigrate, as under those

circumstances Stanton-Talbot was no home for them."

"I think Fulbrook could bear even that blow," said Jacinth, lightly ; "more especially if the house were let to a big family with money. Ah! money ; what an important factor that is, Lord William ; money does everything, procures everything, ensures everything, even a seat in the House."

"Ensures everything but happiness and health," said Lord William, tritely.

"Nonsense," replied Jacinth, impulsively ; "it can ensure both ; at least, it can make bad health bearable, and what can make one miserable if one has plenty of money, and can pay all one's bills? Money can buy friends, love, health, pleasure : every single thing one wants. I remember when I, too, had money at my command, Lord William, and I am speaking from experience. Money! What would I not do, I wonder, to find myself once more with enough and to spare? It's a good thing Mephistopheles does not haunt Bevercombe ; he might have me cheap."

Lord William laughed. "It is a better thing still that you are not judged from your own words," he said. "From all I hear, you had every chance of riches yesterday, and that for a less price than Mephistopheles is supposed to ask; yet you did not avail yourself of it."

"What do you mean?" said Jacinth, flushing deeply, and half rising from her chair.

"The Squire makes no secret of his hopes," replied Lord William. "Neither does he object to people knowing you refused him. He was telling the whole story at the market table this afternoon, and gave it as his reason for changing his coat. He says if I am successful at the poll, I shall be unsuccessful elsewhere, and that therefore he is determined I shall win the contest, and thus put myself out of court, as far as your favours are concerned, Miss Merridew." Then as Jacinth's colour deepened once more, and she turned away to go into the house, overwhelmed with anger and confusion, Lord William took her hands and drew her towards him.

"Was the Squire right?" he asked, gently.
"If I succeed at Barford, am I to be the
most miserable man in the world?"

"I do not know what you mean," she said,
hanging down her head and trying to draw
away her hands. "The Squire must have
been mad to talk of me at all. I would sooner
live all my days here than ever think of
marrying him, whether you get into the
House or not. Please don't keep me, Lord
William; Barbara and Bob will be won-
dering what we are doing."

"Bob knows, and I have his full consent
to speak to you, Jacinth," said Lord William,
eagerly. "This has only precipitated matters.
Listen, listen," he added, as Jacinth en-
deavoured to free herself from his detaining
clasp. "I loved you the first moment I saw you,
dear. I shall never forget you and the lovely
Bevercombe woods on that June morning;
and when you looked at me, I swore that
come what might I would do my best to win
you. I have never ridden away from you
over the desolate heath to my yet more

desolate home without taking your image with me, and without seeing you come down the steps at Woodyhyde to greet me, and ask me about all I have been doing. I have never loved any one in all my life as I love you ; and I beg you not to send me away from you, Jacinth, for I shall never rest until you are my wife," and he drew her towards him, as if to embrace her passionately.

Jacinth drew her hands from his and put them before her face. In this supreme moment she saw as in a vision Francis Seymour's face, as it had looked into hers that June day so long ago ; she felt the happy blood course through her veins once more ; she experienced the rapturous content with which she had listened to his vows, and then in a moment realized that she did not, never could, love this man, as she had loved, nay, worshipped the boy lover of her early years ; then she recollect ed how weakly he had given her up ; that he was married, and that they could never be anything but friends ; and though she knew that his voice had still the olden

power, she saw no reason why she should throw away the substance for the shadow, and refuse Lord William's splendid offer, because she was not in love with him, and because she never would be what is called "in love" with anybody any more.

At the same time she must have time for thought—it was all so sudden. Of course she had seen that Lord William admired her, but her belief in her own bad luck had prevented her ever contemplating what her position as his wife would be. Hard-headed, and full of common sense to a fault, as Jacinth was, she had really believed that Lord William's attentions were merely those electioneering ones, to which all the dwellers in the country are too much accustomed, to be thereby unduly elevated in their own esteem ; and thinking that he would be seen no more in their midst, once the poll was declared, had really thought no more of him than she had of Herbert Talbot or of the Squire himself.

Expecting nothing of life but the most

humdrum of portions, and having once had her share, as she imagined, of all the good things of this world ; Jacinth had been content to ignore the day-dreaming in which most women indulge, and had made up her mind to expect nothing, the while she endured the sameful days that were to be her future ; much as one endures a dull ache that is not pain quite, but is an uncomfortable sensation for all that ; still is not sufficiently bad to require the aid of a doctor ; and, at the best, had expected a time to come of comparative ease in middle age, when Bob should have emancipated his family from the clutches of poverty, and when it would no longer be necessary to contemplate every sixpence twice before spending it.

And now all was changed. True, that Lord William's politics were all wrong, and that his aims were rather political than social ; that every idea he had was opposed to Jacinth's ideas and hopes and aspirations ; that what appealed to him bored her to death, and that she detested the country and poor people as much as he cared for them. But he was a Duke's

son ; all his friends were as Conservative and orthodox as even Jacinth could wish ; and, after all, if he loved her as he said he did, he would soon return to the fold, and be as fond of London and of society as he appeared to be at present of the Fulbrook hills and the clay-pit *protégés* who had already come to blows with the farmers in his cause, on the subject of the election.

And he loved her ! As Jacinth uncovered her face and looked timidly up at her lover, she could not help reading in his honest countenance that love was a very real thing to him ; his eyes looked fully into her's, and as she was about to speak, he bent forward and kissed her on the lips.

"I have conquered," he said, joyously. "Then you will come to me, Jacinth ? Ah !" as she suffered him to hold her hand in his, "now Woodyhyde will be home indeed, and I shall be able to do all I feel I was born for, with you by my side, and with you to help me on."

"But I have said nothing," exclaimed

Jacinth ; " you take too much for granted, Lord William; you are too impetuous. I was looking at you to see if you really loved me, and at once you imagine I have said, 'Yes.' I want to explain. You took me by surprise. I never thought,—we are so different," and Jacinth stammered out her sentences, feeling more confused than she had ever done in all her life before.

Lord William put his arm round her, and drew her down beside him on the garden seat.

" You did not say, ' No,' and therefore you mean, ' Yes,'" he said, quietly taking possession of her. " I know we are different, which is all the more reason why we should agree; and you know I love you. I do not expect you to love me in a hurry, but you will love me, I am sure, and you must in time, because love begets love. I am content to believe this, or anything, so that you will really and truly marry me. Jacinth," he continued softly, as she said nothing, but allowed him to retain her hand, " I have

never known what home was. I have always been different to all my people, the ugly duckling, in fact, of my father's house. I must have been changed at birth, I think ; anyhow, no one has ever really cared for me. Now you will, will you not ? you will learn to love me, and sympathise with me ? ” and he leaned forward and looked lovingly into Jacinth’s face.

A sudden access of pity seized her ; she could never, she felt, be one with him, really and truly ; all her sympathy would be with the Duke and the Duke’s family ; all her end and aim to penetrate as far as she could into the ducal circles and remain there, the while she spent all her endeavours on being a social success. She could never care for the country or country people. He must not marry her thinking that he had found a kindred spirit, and she said quickly, drawing her hands from his, “ It’s no good, Lord William ; no good really. I should, I am sure, be far more likely to take the part of your people than yours. You must remember I am a Conservative :

a Londoner, bound to London with all the bonds that only a true Cockney understands ; that every day spent in Bevercombe is a day wasted in my estimation, and that my detestation of the country is only equalled by my dislike to the people who live there. If I married you, I should want to be in town, not at Woodyhyde."

"If I am in the House, we must be in London a greater part of the year," replied Lord William, eagerly, "and then, too, Jacinth, forgive me if I say you have never known how beautiful life in the country can be, if you have a big house, and horses to ride and drive, to say nothing of interests that could never be yours unless you had a house of your own and the status of a married woman. Besides, dear, don't think of anything except that I adore you, and that my love will make any home happy. I will forestall your every wish. You could not help being happy had you an ardent lover waiting on you hand and foot. Come to me, dearest ; you shall never have cause to rue the day when you said 'Yes.' "

"But you may," persisted Jacinth. "I am selfish, passionate—oh! a thousand unpleasant qualities are bound up in me. I cannot think what you have fallen in love with in me. I feel I must warn you of the fate you are bringing upon yourself!"

"Love cannot be reduced to reason," said Lord William, "yet if you ask me why I love you, look in your glass, and answer the question for yourself. You have thrown a spell over me, Jacinth; and I know we were born for each other. Come, dearest, let me know from your own lips you will be my wife?" and once more he drew her towards him passionately.

"On your own head be it!" she replied; "but, Lord William, please, not one word until after the twenty-ninth. Remember, if you lose your election you lose me; and we cannot afford to dispense with the Squire's support, after all. I mean you," she added, laughing lightly, "not *we*. I don't want Barford to have a Liberal member; though I must confess I want you to represent the borough:

now, at least." And then, as Lord William clasped her to his breast, and thanked her rapturously for her consent, she allowed her head to rest for a moment on his shoulder, as he drew a ring from his little finger and put it on her hand, sealing its place there with a kiss.

" My own for ever," he said, passionately. " Jacinth, you have all my happiness in your hands. I forget everything now I am with you, and you are my own. Promise me that you will love me only half as well as I love you ; I shall be quite satisfied. Oh ! this weary election ; to think I must tear myself away to address half-a-dozen farmers and as many plough-boys in the barn at Littlecroft, my rival in the chair. I shall be thinking of you all the time, and only trust I may not talk to them of you, instead of all the glorious privileges which will be theirs if I am returned to Parliament," and so saying, he rose, and, holding both Jacinth's hands in his, looked straight into her eyes with his own honest ones ; and then, once more kissing

her passionately, he was turning away towards the house with her, when Bob came out of the library and told him his horses were waiting, in such a suggestive manner, that Lord William turned to him and said : " You'll have me for a brother, Merridew ; she has consented to be my wife," and before Bob could reply, Jacinth sprang past him, and going into her room, sat down in front of her desk, to contemplate in peace and silence the brilliant future that appeared about to open out before her.

As she sank down into her chair she saw the square white envelope with the office seal that was now her almost daily portion of the outside world. There was the handwriting that she would have known among a thousand ; the curious odour of smoke that not even the passage through the post could quite obliterate ; and as she took it up and opened it, at this supreme moment of her life, she could not resist kissing the letter fiercely, feeling as if by her own act she had now put aside for ever the one real love of her young

life; the while she knew that in the future she would have far more chance of real happiness with Lord William, than she could have ever had with the cool calculating man of the world, who had given her up at the very moment when she wanted him most. Still, now she would not think of the future; only of the past. She knew the future was safe, and better in the highest sense of the word than the past could ever be; yet she felt very much as would a child condemned to the rice pudding and mutton *regime* that is so good for it, the while it has remembrances of the chicken and jelly of last night's party, oblivious of the results that were so painful and so sure.

There was no doubt that Lady William Petersfield would have a decorous, sheltered, safe path of usefulness before her that would be propriety itself; full of opportunities for doing good, and being good; no more doubt than that as Francis Seymour's wife, she would have led the feverishly amusing Society scramble, that is inseparable from the

existence of a modern journalist ; who is nowhere if he or she be not in the front of everything that goes on ; but her soul sickened as she recognised this, and recognised also that, in climbing high, she would enter another, rarified atmosphere, where, at first, at least, she would be very uncomfortable.

As she thought over all this, a hundred and one pictures passed before her mind's eye ; pictures from that past which now she could afford to look back upon, when London was once more within her grasp ; but Francis Seymour's face and Francis Seymour's voice were inseparable from such contemplation, and, with a sigh, Jacinth took up the letter and opened it. As she did so, there fell out one of those long thin strips of paper so dear to the heart of the amateur scribbler, so fraught with rage and despair to the old journalistic hand. Jacinth unfolded it ; it was headed "Pink and Blue Fever," and she discovered it was a satirical account of Barford tactics ; an account that had been forwarded from time to time in her letters to

the journalist. As she read on she saw that no one was spared ; neither Mr. Talbot, with his love for virtue, wool-work, and his abject struggles to cram English history from the simplest of manuals ; nor Lord William, with his quixotic plans for the future, and his boldly-spoken promises of future reform. She recognised her own sentences in print with a strange sense of unreality, and found herself laughing at some of her own jokes. She had had no idea how funny she had been. Then she turned to the letter, in which Mr. Seymour related how he had used her epistles for the benefit of an independent literary journal for which he wrote occasionally, and which aspired to be completely free from any political bias ; how, the article having been printed, he had sent her a slip and a cheque for three guineas ; and how he was quite sure now, as he, indeed, had always expected from the first, that she could earn a steady £100 a year at least if she were to take to writing.

Jacinth looked at the article again. It

would never do to let anyone know she was the originator—she would not say author—of the paper. No one was spared ; not the Fulbrook spinsters, nor the energetic wife of the local brewer, whose appearance in pink muslin had so enraged the Squire ; and, in fact, it was just such a paper as would fall like a bombshell on the Barford people, and would scatter death and destruction wherever it came. There was no hope of its being allowed to die a natural death ; the paper was one the Salways, at least, always took in, and it was also to be found in the news room. Bob would be sure to see it, but he could be trusted ; the thing would be to conceal her part in it from Lord William, who would scarcely be flattered at his own portrait, which was yet so absurdly like that Jacinth could not help laughing again, as she re-read the caustic sentences. Well ! if every trade failed, she could add one more to the number of women who have found the outlet in writing that they used to do in the far more useful, if less congenial, stitching

and needlework on which the female intellect used entirely to rely for pastime. As Jacinth was contemplating the proof, she heard Bob's step on the stairs. She went to her door and called him in.

"I was waiting for you to call me," he said, easily. "Well! when is it to be?"

"When is what to be?" she replied, knitting her brows. "See! Bob, I want you to read that," and she handed him the slip.

"A nice friendly thing, isn't it?" said Bob. "You'll cut your acquaintance after this, I should say. Why, the fellow has actually sent you the proof. Cheek isn't the word for his behaviour. I should like to kick the fellow."

"Don't you think it's funny?" faltered Jacinth, determining immediately that she would die rather than confess her share in the production.

"Funny? oh! yes, awfully funny," answered Bob, impatiently. "It was awfully funny to see poor, good, little Mrs. Salway receive at least twelve copies of the *Scavenger* when she went for her afternoon letters, and to

hear her sob at the sight of what she knew beforehand was meant for her ; for, of course, her own copy had already been delivered. We have had an amusing day altogether, what with Mrs. Talbot's fainting, and one thing and another, and now this is the climax. I did hope none of you would see what that fellow has been guilty of."

"I really see nothing here but a most entertaining and very truthful account of the election tactics in Barford," said Jacinth, with spirit. "If people will behave like idiots they are fair game. Both sides are served impartially, Bob ; there is no favour shown to either."

"I don't like your modern journalism at all," exclaimed Bob ; "nothing is sacred from the present day scribbler, and the women are the worst of the lot, as you'll find out when you go to town, my love. Your dearest friend turns out to be purveyor of news to the *Daily Dustbin*, and her cousin and aunts scrabble for pieces of intelligence to make "pars," as they call it, for divers other

delightful journals. They keep themselves in clothes by pulling their friends' garments to morsels in the columns of some third-rate journal, and procure themselves luxuries by selling intelligence, aye, and even scandal, about their friends' doings, which would have caused them to be ostracised a few years ago. When I see the army of women scribblers kow-towing to servants for scraps of news, and taking blackmail from tradesmen for puffing their wares in what they call a London letter, I feel inclined to believe that it would be far better if they had never learned to read or write. At all events then they wouldn't have degraded literature as they do now. Bah ! I haven't patience to discuss the matter. Burn the thing, Jacinth ; don't let Barbara see it; and when you are Lady William Petersfield, and your husband is in the House, and in such a position that all he says and does is 'saleable,' give Mr. Seymour and his female regiment a wide berth, or you'll find yourself in hot water. But let us forget this scandalous breach of hospitality, for I noticed that the

Powells have not escaped, and let me congratulate you as heartily as you like dear, but oh! so sincerely. I never thought such good fortune would come our way again," and as Bob kissed his sister warmly, his eyes filled with tears.

Jacinth, always impatient of sentiment, and doubly cross at his outspoken comment on her unfortunate article, felt immediately inclined to contradict him and to declare she was not engaged. However, as she undoubtedly was, and as her engagement would as undoubtedly be published the moment the election was over, she said carelessly : "I don't see that it is such a tremendous piece of luck, Bob. I dare say if I had been in town I should have done much better. I never thought I should marry a man whose politics are my detestation, and with whom I have few ideas in common."

"Don't for Heaven's sake talk like that!" said Bob, impressively. "You've a chance in a thousand, I tell you, Jacinth. William Petersfield's heart is as good as gold ; he is

manly, honest, religious in the widest sense of the word, and in fact — ”

“ In fact, he is a paragon; *ergo*, a bit of a bore,” said Jacinth, mutinously. Then, seeing her brother was really vexed with her, she said: “ Well! I won’t tease you, Bob, though you deserve to be tormented for sneering at Mr. Seymour’s clever article. I believe you are right, and I have every chance of happiness. Funny, isn’t it! having two offers in two days in Bevercombe?”

“ Jacinth, you have every chance of happiness, every chance of a good and happy future. You have fortune by the hand,” said her brother, far more seriously than he ever spoke; “ but to have is one thing, to hold another; think of that, and do all in your power to hold the good luck that has come to you. Now tear up that rubbish and come to Barbara. She is longing to congratulate you.”

Jacinth threw the letter and article into her desk and turned the key, feeling considerably thankful that Bob had not seen the long green slip of paper that had accompanied the

article, and which was already set aside in Jacinth's mind to pay for her muslin dresses in Barford.

"There!" she said, "I won't destroy it yet, as I want to read it again. As you say, Bob, I have a good future before me; it won't be my fault if I don't hold it fast;" and so saying, she took her brother's hand, and they ran downstairs together to receive Barbara's congratulations, and to drink Jacinth's health, in a whisper, over the supper-table, for fear the good news might penetrate village-wards through the kitchen, and so reach Squire Wylliams' ears before the all important day of the election was over.

END OF VOL. I.





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